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LITHUANIA

The Road to Independence

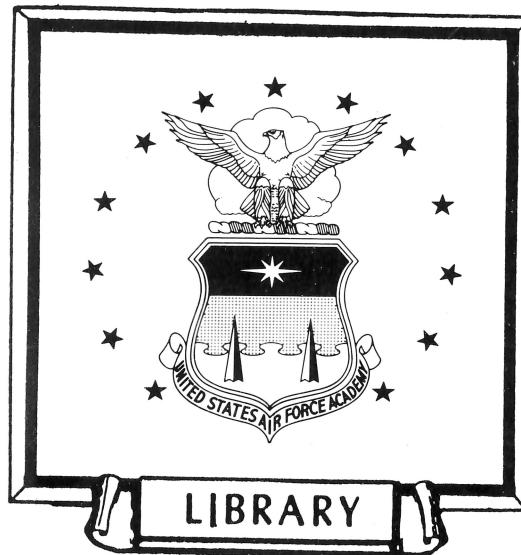
1917-1940

A Documentary Survey



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Introduction

Lithuania has been part of the Soviet Union for nearly fifty years now. Historically bound to Russia, it joined the USSR in 1940 by decision of its Popular Sejm. Lithuania thereby strengthened its national sovereignty, restored its territorial integrity and, at long last, ensured the security of its state borders.

At first glance, this might seem a paradox. How can a small country retain its independence after joining a larger country, even if it does so of its own free will, in keeping with historical traditions and the people's wishes?

History, in fact, is full of paradoxes, especially the history of small nations whose land and freedom have always been subject to bargaining or even seizure by larger countries. "Evil demons", bearing the crowns of the major European monarchies, continuously mauled their smaller neighbours, including Lithuania. From the time the Lithuanian state emerged in the 13th century up to 1940, such "evil demons" acting against it included the rulers of various German states, Poland, tsarist Russia, and the German Empire. The last threat to Lithuania came from Nazi Germany.

At that time, Lithuania was in a situation resembling that of Czechoslovakia following the "Munich agreement" by which the British and the French had abandoned the small Slavic state to Nazi Germany.

Hitler's plans meant total ruin for Lithuania and the Lithuanians, as they did for many other countries and peoples. This had been spelled out in Nazi military documents and, more importantly, in Germany's actual policies on the territory of countries that had fallen under its rule even for short periods of time.

The following is an excerpt from an instruction to the Reich Commissioner for the Baltic Countries and Byelorussia from

Alfred Rosenberg, Nazi Minister for the Occupied Eastern Territories:

"The aim of a Reich commissioner for Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and White Ruthenia ... must be to strive to achieve the form of a German Protectorate and then transform the region into part of the Greater German Reich by germanising racially possible elements, colonising Germanic races, and banishing undesirable elements. The Baltic Sea must become a Germanic inland sea under the guardianship of Greater Germany."¹

But this was not to be. Furthermore, at a time when one by one European nations were falling prey to German expansion, Lithuania not only retained its freedom but regained control over its entire territory.

This book is based on documents kept by the Academy of Sciences and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic. The documents were selected by Zenonas Vasiliauskas, Gedeminas Vaskela, Regina Gepkaite, and Vitautas Kancevičius.

Some of the documents have been published before, others for the first time.

Part I.

Ages in History: A Fleeting Moment of Freedom

Historical Background

The Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic lies in the western part of the Soviet Union, on the Baltic Sea. In the north, Lithuania shares a border with the Latvian SSR; in the east and south, with the Byelorussian SSR; and in the southwest, with the Kaliningrad region of the Russian Federation. In addition, Lithuania has a common border with the Polish People's Republic in the south-west.

Lithuania's territory comprises 65,200 square kilometres. Its shoreline (in the area of Lithuania's largest port of Klaipeda) is 99 kilometres long.

In 1985 Lithuania's population totalled 3,570,000, with Lithuanians accounting for the majority. The capital, Vilnius, houses 544,000 residents.

The Lithuanian language belongs to the Baltic group of the Indo-European languages. It is spoken by the majority of the republic's population.

The history of the Lithuanian state begins in the 13th century. In 1240, an early feudal state emerged on the territory of present-day Lithuania, ruled by the Grand Duke of Lithuania. The duchy included Slavic lands which were populated by Russians, Byelorussians and Ukrainians.

Almost immediately, Lithuania became the target of aggression from German knights of the Livonian and Teutonic Orders. But it remained independent, and in 1410 Teutonic forces were defeated in the

famous Battle of Grunwald by the joint forces of Lithuania, Poland and Russia.

The Lithuanians remained pagans for centuries. Only in 1387, the last in Europe, did they adopt Catholicism.

As a result of their joint defensive efforts against the German knights, Lithuania and Poland drew closer together and with the Union of Lublin of 1569 merged into one state called Rzecz Pospolita. The merger, however, proved disadvantageous to national interests of the Lithuanian people and even those of Lithuania's feudal lords, since Rzecz Pospolita was dominated almost exclusively by various groups of Polish landlords. Lithuanian peasants were subjected to oppression from two quarters and an internecine war between the major feudal lords of Rzecz Pospolita prevented the two countries from maintaining their union for long. Moreover, the monarchs of neighbouring states had become increasingly involved in the power struggle within Rzecz Pospolita. There were three partitions of Poland and Lithuania (in 1772, 1793 and 1795) between Prussia, Austria and Russia. In 1814 and 1815, the Congress of Vienna sanctioned a partition of the states belonging to the Napoleonic coalition, the result of which being that all of Lithuania (excluding Klaipeda) became part of the Russian Empire.

Objectively, Russia's annexation of Lithuania helped to stabilise the situation there. The vast Russian market facilitated rapid growth of what were at the time progressive capitalist relations in Lithuania. At the same time, the merger led to the involvement of Lithuania's working masses in the revolutionary movement. There were two large uprisings (in 1830-31 and 1863-64), aimed against tsarist rule. They met with the support of progressive groups in Russian society.

Gradually, the interests of the working people of Russia and Lithuania (and of all other non-Russian territories of the Russian Empire, for that matter) drew closer together, and towards the early 20th century there were more and more joint protests by people of all nationalities. The working people of Lithuania took an active part in the Russian Revolution of 1905-1907, in the February 1917 Revolution, which led to the fall of the tsarist regime, and in the October 1917 Revolution, which marked the beginning of a new chapter in the history of all peoples of the former Russian Empire, including the Lithuanians.

1917-1940: A Chronicle of Events

At the time of the October Revolution in Russia, Lithuania was occupied by German forces which had seized this territory in the course of the First World War. Nonetheless, in December 1918 Soviet government was proclaimed there, though it lasted just a few months. It was during this complicated period that Lithuania was granted independence by the revolutionary government of Russia. But how did a bourgeois government that had come to power in Lithuania with the help of German and Polish forces handle this independence?

There follows below a chronicle of events that occurred between 1917 and 1940—both internal events and international developments affecting Lithuania. This is the most concise way to trace the history of those years.

November 7 (October 25*), 1917. An armed uprising is victorious in Petrograd, then the capital of Russia.

November 8 (October 26), 1917. The first Soviet government—the Council of People's Commissars—is formed under Lenin's leadership.

November 15 (2), 1917. The Council of People's Commissars issues a Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia, proclaiming the principle of self-determination for the peoples of the former Russian Empire.

February 16, 1918. The Lietuvos Taryba** approves the so-called Independence Act of bourgeois Lithuania.

June 1918. The Taryba declares Lithuania a monarchy and invites Duke Wilhelm von Urach of Württemberg to the throne.

October 1-3, 1918. The Communist Party of Lithuania holds its First Congress in Vilnius.

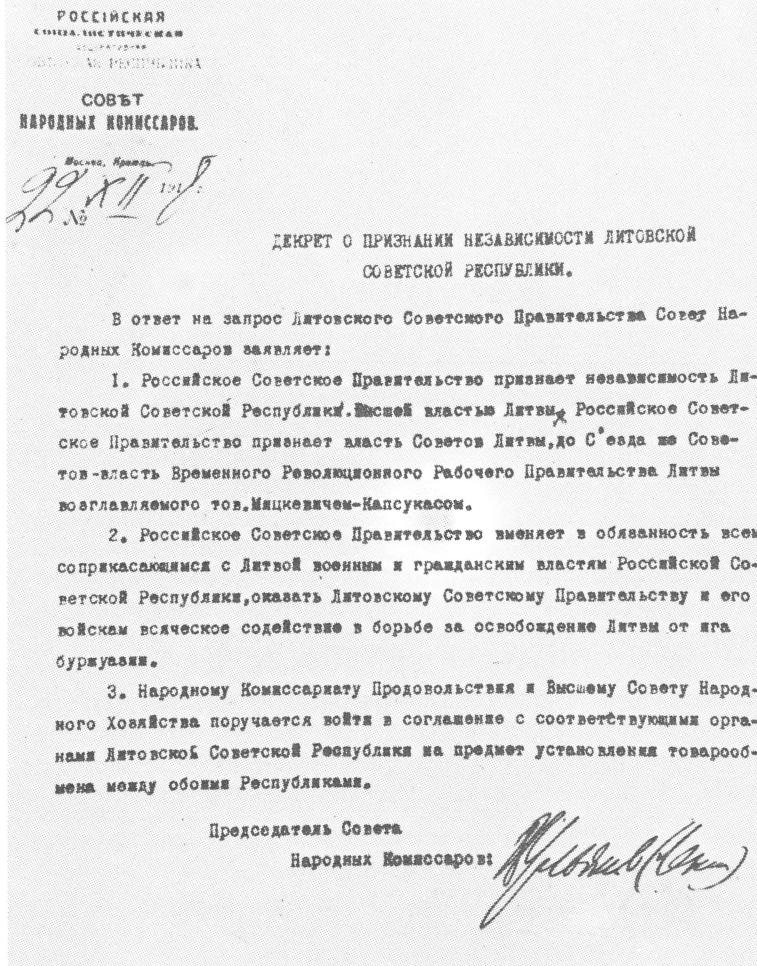
December 1918-January 1919. Soviet government is proclaimed in the part of Lithuania not occupied by the Germans.

December 8, 1918. A Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Workers and Peasants of Lithuania is formed.

* According to the calendar then used in Russia.—*Ed.*

** The Lietuvos Taryba (Lithuanian Council) was a bourgeois-nationalist governmental body formed after the collapse of tsarist rule in Russia. After the defeat of Soviet government in Lithuania, it created the state mechanism of a bourgeois republic.

Russia's first Soviet government (the Soviet of People's Commissars), headed by Lenin, recognised the independence of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic in the Decree of December 22, 1918. The Decree secured political and economic cooperation between the two sovereign states.



December 16, 1918. The revolutionary government proclaims Lithuania a Soviet Republic. There is a general political strike and a demonstration in Vilnius in support of Soviet government in Lithuania.

December 22, 1918. By special decree, the Soviet government of Russia recognises the independence of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic.

December 23, 1918. The All-Russia Central Executive Committee (the legislative body of Soviet Russia) endorses the government decision recognising the independence of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia—the three Baltic countries that had been part of the former Russian Empire.

Early January 1919. The Red Army crushes an anti-Soviet rebellion of Polish counter-revolutionaries in Vilnius.

April 19-21, 1919. The troops of bourgeois-landlord-ruled Poland capture Vilnius.

August 1919. Polish and German invaders and internal counter-revolutionary forces defeat Soviet government in Lithuania. A bourgeois regime is established.

September 16, 1919. The workers of Kaunas hold a general strike in protest against bourgeois rule.

September 1919. The Soviet government offers to begin peace negotiations with Lithuania.

May 15, 1920. The Constituent Sejm of bourgeois Lithuania meets in session.

July 12, 1920. Soviet Russia and Lithuania sign a peace treaty. The Soviet government confirms Lithuania's rights to Vilnius and the Vilnius region.

August 27, 1920. Soviet Russia turns Vilnius and the Vilnius region, liberated by the Red Army, over to Lithuania.

October 9, 1920. Polish forces re-capture Vilnius.

January 15, 1923. The Klaipeda region is reincorporated into Lithuania.

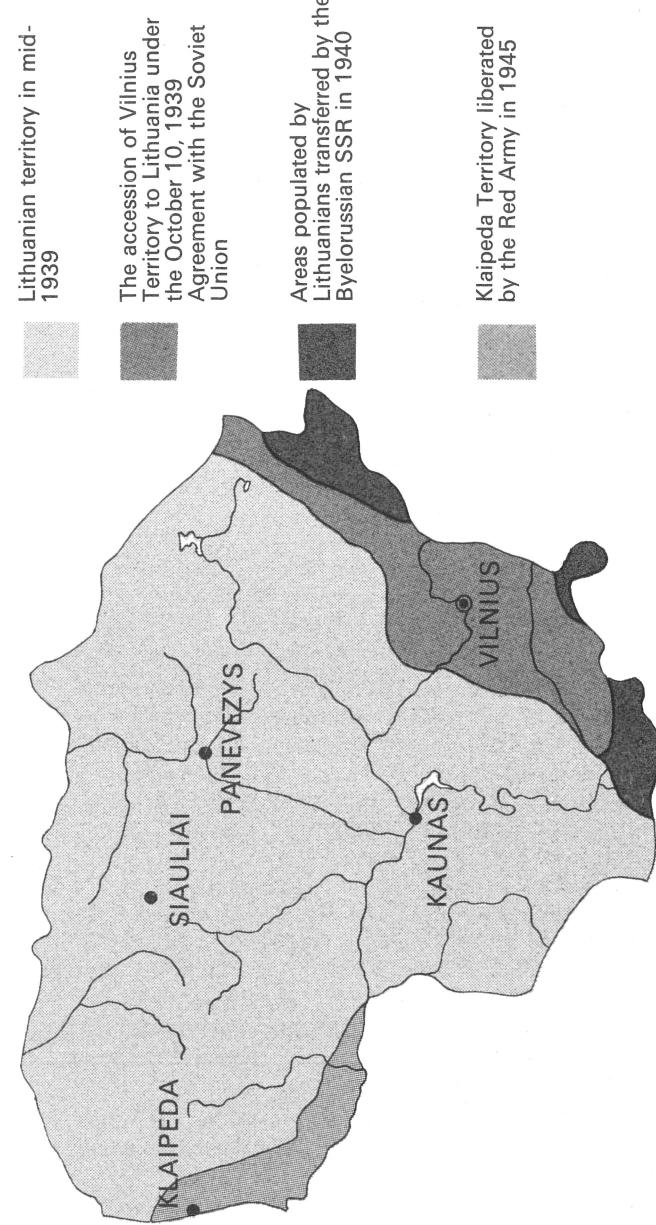
September 28, 1926. Lithuania and the Soviet Union sign a non-aggression treaty. The USSR confirms Lithuania's rights to Vilnius.

December 17, 1926. There is a fascist take-over in Lithuania.

December 27, 1926. The Lithuanian fascists execute Communist Party leaders.

January 1933. Hitler comes to power in Germany.

Reunification of Lithuanian lands within the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic



February 1936. Lithuania's fascist authorities ban bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties.

January 1937. The Communist Party of Lithuania declares a platform for an anti-fascist popular front.

March 1938. There is a Polish-Lithuanian crisis; Lithuania accepts Poland's ultimatum; diplomatic relations are established.

September 29-30, 1938. At Munich, Britain and France give Germany a free hand to dismember Czechoslovakia.

March 15, 1939. Nazi Germany eliminates Czechoslovakia's independence.

March 22, 1939. Germany seizes the Klaipeda region.

September 1, 1939. Germany invades Poland, unleashing the Second World War.

September 19, 1939. The Red Army liberates Vilnius and the Vilnius region.

October 10, 1939. Lithuania and the Soviet Union sign a treaty pledging mutual assistance and turning Vilnius and the Vilnius region over to Lithuania.

June 15-17, 1940. The fascist regime is toppled and a socialist revolution begins in Lithuania. A People's Government is formed.

July 14-15, 1940. Elections to the Popular Sejm are held.

July 21, 1940. The Popular Sejm proclaims Lithuania a Soviet Socialist Republic and approves a declaration requesting that Lithuania be admitted into the USSR.

August 3, 1940. The USSR Supreme Soviet admits Lithuania into the Soviet Union and gives the republic a number of areas with predominantly Lithuanian populations.

August 25, 1940. A special session of the Popular Sejm approves a Constitution (Fundamental Law) of the Lithuanian SSR.

The Revolution in Russia and the Independence of Lithuania

For the Lithuanian people the ideal of national freedom was revived when the October Revolution triumphed in Russia. On November 15 (2*), 1917, the newly formed Soviet government

* See p. 9.

promulgated a Declaration of Rights of the Peoples of Russia:

"... the Council of People's Commissars has resolved to put the following principles at the basis of its activity on the issue of the nationalities of Russia:

"(1) Equality and sovereignty of the peoples of Russia.

"(2) The right of the peoples of Russia to free self-determination, up to secession and the formation of an independent state.

"(3) The revoking of all and every national and national-religious privilege and restriction.

"(4) Free development of national minorities and ethnographic groups residing in the territory of Russia."²

Lithuania, however, was occupied by German forces at that time, so that the Soviet government's decision based on goodwill and concern for the interests of the peoples of Russia could not bring about Lithuania's immediate independence. The Lithuanian working people and the Russian Bolsheviks had to fight for it. For the Lithuanian Landrat, supported by the German occupation authorities, claimed to be the "sole authorised ruling body of the Lithuanian people". What was the Landrat and how legitimate was its claim? The answer to this question can be found in a Declaration made by Vincas Mickevičius-Kapsukas*, a representative of the Commissariat for Lithuanian Affairs**:

"The Lithuanian Landrat consists of 20 members who were elected at the so-called Vilna Lithuanian Conference (September 18-22), which does not include a single worker. This conference was formed arbitrarily, at the invitation of a self-appointed organising bureau, not on the basis of proper democratic elections, without the active participation of the Lithuanian masses, and in the absence of the freedom of speech and assembly. It worked behind closed doors. The occupation authorities banned even reports about its proceedings and prohibited the conference resolution from being published. This was done because peasants and other participants in the conference spoke out most strongly against the regime imposed by the occupation authorities and

* V. Mickevičius-Kapsukas (1880-1935) was a prominent figure of the Lithuanian and international workers' movement and one of the organisers and leaders of the Communist Party of Lithuania.

** The Commissariat for Lithuanian Affairs was formed on December 8, 1917, to protect the interests of Lithuanian citizens, as well as Lithuania's proprietary and other interests in Russia.

voiced a desire to be rid of them at any cost. It was decided at this very conference that it was to have no legal force nor be empowered to determine the nature of relations with the country's neighbours, as it had not been elected by the population... This was done primarily due to pressure from workers and peasants who would not recognise a body set up with the direct involvement of the occupation authorities as a lawful representative of the Lithuanian people*."³

Germany's plans were obvious. It wanted to exploit the revolution in Russia, with which it was at war and part of whose territory it was occupying, in order to create a puppet government in Lithuania, a government that would be at the beck and call of the occupation authorities. In these conditions, "self-determination for Lithuania" would not have resulted in genuine independence. It would only have helped right-wing bourgeois groups, closely linked with the occupation forces, to usurp power in the country. Considering Germany's long-standing claim to Lithuanian territory, the prospects appeared grim. If the Lithuanian Landrat had been granted constitutional powers, this would have been the first step towards the further annexation of Lithuania by the German Empire.

The Declaration of the representative of the Commissariat for Lithuanian Affairs had the following to say in this respect:

"In the opinion of Lithuanian democrats, the decisive say regarding the future of Lithuania belongs not to the representatives of the German government or the government of the Russian Republic, and not to those bourgeois groups that supported tsarism and are now seeking an alliance with the German government; nor does it belong to the organisers of the Vilna Lithuanian Conference or the Lithuanian Landrat. It belongs to the democratic population of Lithuania, first of all, to the workers and poor peasants of Lithuania, without ethnic distinction.

"In order to pursue free self-determination, they consider it absolutely necessary to secure the conditions that have been proposed by the Russian delegation**:

"1. The immediate withdrawal of the German forces and

* After the October Revolution in Russia, the German occupation authorities decided to recognise the Landrat, expand it with its henchmen, and declare it Lithuania's governing body.

** The delegation of Soviet Russia at the peace talks between Russia and Germany at Brest-Litovsk.

police from occupied Lithuania following the conclusion of a peace with Russia, and the dismantling of all institutions imposed by the occupation authorities;

"2. The granting of all power to the local population;

"3. The guaranteeing of full freedom of speech, the press, assembly and association for the working masses..."**⁴

Further events showed that neither Germany nor Germany's opponents in the First World War, i.e., Britain and France, had any plans whatever for Lithuania's independence. Despite Germany's defeat in November 1918 and the completion of the First World War, German occupation of Lithuania continued, this time with the consent of the Entente countries**. After the revolution in Russia and Germany's defeat in the First World War, the political interests of the Entente powers focused on stifling the Soviet government. The Entente turned into a counter-revolutionary, anti-Soviet bloc that formed an alliance of 14 countries against Soviet Russia and other Soviet republics. In those conditions the Entente leaders regarded the German occupation troops as the only real anti-Soviet force in Lithuania.

Revolutionary Russia, on the other hand, believed that Germany's defeat would make it possible to bring about self-determination for the western non-Russian regions of the former Russian Empire, including Lithuania. Now, what did Lithuanians themselves think about Soviet Russia? The following is an excerpt from the memoirs of Karolis Požela, a noted figure of the revolutionary movement in Lithuania:

"I returned to Lithuania from Soviet Russia in early 1918. On March 10, I was already in my native region of Geimelis. Very few people were coming back to Lithuania at the time. So peasants from nearby villages began coming to me that same day to inquire about their relatives who had fled to Russia during the German offensive in 1915... The affluent peasants, *kulaks*, had already heard that the Bolsheviks had taken power in Russia and that those Bolsheviks were 'robbers'.

"My conversations with workers and small-holding peasants were of a different nature. They sought confirmation from me of

* The Declaration goes on to enumerate other demands for democratic reforms.

** The Entente was a military and political alliance of Britain, France, Russia and Italy (from 1915) fighting against Germany and its allies in the First World War.

the good news they had heard: Was it true that the Bolsheviks were themselves workers? Was it true that the government in Russia had driven away all landlords and had given the land to the workers and peasants?

"Some of the poor people did not know which to believe—the stories of returnees from Russia or the sermons of Catholic priests about the Bolshevik 'robbers'. Most were waiting for the Bolsheviks to come and for the Germans to be driven out. The poor said that the rich *kulak* peasants together with the Germans were too hard on labourers."⁵

These sentiments were among the factors that prompted the setting-up of Soviets in that part of Lithuania liberated from the Germans, from the autumn of 1918. The people's struggle in Lithuania was led by the Communist Party, which had been founded in October 1918. It emerged from revolutionary organisations of the Lithuanian Social Democrats who during the tsarist years had fought together with the Russian Bolsheviks against autocracy and capitalist rule. Lithuania's Social Democrats had always been among the most active contingents of the Russian revolutionary movement, and the Communist Party immediately became an influential political force in the country. It enjoyed the support of the Lithuanian working people and for this reason proved able, on December 8, 1918, to establish a Provisional Government of the Workers and Peasants which announced the transfer of power to the Soviets of Workers', Landless and Smallholding Peasants' Deputies of Lithuania.

The working people responded immediately with rallies and demonstrations in support of the new government. These took place in Kaunas, Šiauliai, Panevėžys, Marijampole and other towns. In Vilnius alone, some 30,000 workers and poor people took to the streets. In smaller towns there were joint actions by workers and peasants from adjacent villages. About 20,000 urban and rural dwellers demonstrated in Panevėžys.

This was a revolution which proposed ways of solving the social and political as well as the national problems of Lithuania. On December 16, 1918, the Provisional Revolutionary Government of the Workers and Peasants of Lithuania issued a manifesto:

"On behalf of the risen workers and poorest peasants of Lithuania, on behalf of the Red Army soldiers of Lithuania, we declare the power of the German military occupation, the Lithu-

anian Taryba and all other bourgeois national councils and committees overthrown.

"All power is being transferred to the Soviets of Workers' and Landless and Small-holding Peasants' Deputies of Lithuania.

"Workers, landless and small-holding peasants of Lithuania,

"The hour of liberation from the unbearable yoke of the German invaders, from humiliation and poverty has struck. This is the hour of your liberation from the century-old oppression of the landlords, *kulak* peasants and capitalists who amassed vast riches on popular grief during the horrible slaughter we have lived through..."⁶

The manifesto outlined a far-reaching programme for socio-economic reform aimed at raising the working people's living standards, developing industry, trade and agriculture, and democratising the life of society. It called for:

- removing limitations of rights based on ethnicity;

- placing all the land belonging to landlords, *kulak* peasants, churches and monasteries, as well as the forests, water and other natural riches under public ownership;

- nationalising railways, the postal service, telegraph and telephone networks, plants, factories and banks;

- strictly forbidding vandalism of industrial and agricultural equipment and implements and the export thereof from Lithuania;

- increasing wages;

- introducing an eight-hour working day in industry, trade and agriculture;

- annulling all debts of workers and poor peasants to capitalists, landlords, *kulaks*, and priests;

- combatting inflated prices and black marketeering;

- taking strong action to restore the country's economic life and Lithuania's trade with Soviet Russia, Germany and other neighbouring countries.

A short time later the provisional revolutionary government banned the exportation of cultural values from the country, founded a State Art Museum of Lithuania, and passed a decree to re-open Vilnius University, which had been closed by the tsarist government of the Russian Empire.

Naturally, Lithuania's new government wished to secure international recognition of the country's independence as soon as possible; all the more so, since part of Lithuanian territory was still

occupied by German troops. It especially needed recognition from one of the great powers, and Soviet Russia met this need. On December 22, 1918, the Council of People's Commissars issued a decree, signed by its Chairman, Lenin, recognising the independence of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic. The next day the decree was endorsed by the All-Russia Central Executive Committee of Soviet Russia*. The endorsement read in part:

"Before the Soviet Republics of Estland, Latvia and Lithuania,** which have been created by the revolutionary struggle of proletarian and peasant masses, the Central Executive Committee reaffirms that the fact that these countries previously belonged to the old tsarist empire places no obligations on them, and at the same time the Central Executive Committee expresses the certainty that only now, on the basis of recognition of full freedom of self-determination and transfer of power to the working class, there emerges a free, voluntary and unbreakable alliance of the working people of all nationalities inhabiting the territory of the former Russian Empire."⁷

Thus, the independence of Lithuania, and of the two other Baltic countries—Latvia and Estonia—was recognised by Soviet Russia completely and without any conditions or reservations. On the other hand—and history provides ample proof of this—the basis for new state formations is provided not only by ethnic factors (there is hardly a country completely homogeneous in this respect) but also by political, social and class prerequisites, and by the unity of historical destinies and social ideals of various peoples. It is in this sense that one should understand the certainty expressed in the above-mentioned document that for the working people a voluntary union of the Soviet republics was both possible and desirable. Needless to say, Soviet Russia had no intention of forcing any other country into this union, as subsequent events clearly demonstrated.

On January 21, 1919, the Council of People's Commissars of the RSFSR*** decided to provide Lithuania with a loan of one hundred million roubles to build up the occupation-ravaged economy of the friendly country.⁸

* The central legislative body of Soviet Russia.

** At about the same time, the working people of Estland (Estonia) and Latvia, which had also been part of the former tsarist empire, established Soviet republics.

*** The Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, the official name Soviet Russia had adopted by this time.

Lithuania was then emerging as a proletarian state. Legislatively, the founding of the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was finalised at the First Congress of the Lithuanian Soviets, which was held in Vilnius on February 18-20, 1919. The Congress confirmed the legality of the policies of the Provisional Revolutionary Government and elected a Central Executive Committee (CEC) of the Lithuanian Republic, the country's supreme body of state authority in the interim between Congresses of Soviets.

But the Lithuanian Soviet Republic was not to exist for long. By February 1919 Soviet government had been established on most of Lithuania's territory. However, since the forces of local revolutionaries were too small, German troops were brought in. Even the funding of the renewed occupation was placed largely on Lithuania itself. Let us examine an excerpt from a record of a meeting of Lithuania's bourgeois government on March 3, 1919:

"...We have too few troops yet, so we have to reckon with the Germans. We have to assume the financial burden without demanding that the Germans follow our leadership... If we pay the

Progressive, revolutionary-minded young people rise up in defense of Soviet government in Lithuania. In the photo: The Vilnius Komsomol's military force.



German soldiers, we will, in one way or another, have greater influence over them..."

"The Cabinet has decided to accept the proposal of the German plenipotentiary to pay German soldiers at the front four marks a day each, but acknowledges the need to determine the number of German troops necessary to defend the front..."⁹

In the meantime, Polish forces attacked Soviet Lithuania from the south. On April 21-22, they occupied Vilnius. The Soviet government in Lithuania fought against the German invaders and the Lithuanian army until the autumn of 1919, but the forces were unequal. Soviet Russia was then in a crucial stage of its fight against numerous internal and external enemies and could not come to the aid of the Lithuanian Republic. On September 1, 1919, Lithuania's Central Executive Committee announced the collapse of Soviet government in the country. But two slogans which Lithuania's Soviet government had announced and materialised, if only for a short while—national freedom and social liberation—remained in the hearts of the Lithuanian people.

Political Sincerity: Soviet Russia Recognises Lithuania's Independence

The revolution in Lithuania was crushed. The bourgeoisie seized state power. Although this happened with the help of foreign intervention, the government of Soviet Russia could not fail to recognise the fact.

Naturally, Lithuania's secession from the former Russian Empire left some major problems unresolved between the two countries. These problems could not be solved in the conditions of an ongoing armed conflict. For this reason, the Soviet government appealed to the government of the Lithuanian Taryba to end hostilities and work out peace terms. In a note on September 11, 1919, the government of the RSFSR said the following in connection with this proposal:

"With this step the Russian Soviet government shows clearly enough that it harbours no aggressive intentions whatsoever towards the newly formed states on the outskirts of the former Russian Empire."¹⁰

On April 3, 1920, the Lithuanian government agreed to start

peace talks with the RSFSR. Why did the bourgeois government of Lithuania consider so long the possibility of securing a peaceful border with Russia?

The Soviet note of September 11, 1919, had proposed to the bourgeois government of Lithuania all it could possibly hope for: peace and recognition of independence. The Entente countries, which were interested in seeing Lithuania embroiled in armed conflict with Soviet Russia, were not willing to guarantee either of these. The Western governments regarded actual, not to mention legal, recognition of Lithuania's independence in close connection with the course of events in Russia and with political support for Russian counter-revolution. As long as the future of Russia remained an open question from the Entente's point of view, there could be no recognition of the states that had emerged on the territory of the former Russian Empire. Neither Britain, France nor the United States wanted an "independent Lithuania" to be detached from the Russian Empire in the event that Soviet government collapsed and capitalism was restored in Russia.

Needless to say, the government of bourgeois Lithuania, like the Western governments, hated Soviet Russia and hoped for its downfall. But Lithuania's internal and external conditions forced it to think of its own salvation. The Soviet proposal carried just such a promise, and if the Lithuanian Taryba had been truly free in its decision-making, it would have jumped at the opportunity immediately; all the more so, given that the return of tsarist circles to power in Russia would have spelled only trouble for Lithuania.

The Entente governments, especially France and the United States, were hatching plans to set up an anti-Soviet bloc in the Baltic region. But the Red Army's major victories dispersed all hopes of a military defeat of the Soviet Republic and compelled the capitalist powers to modify their policies. The bourgeois government of Lithuania signed a peace treaty with the Soviet government.

The peace treaty between Soviet Russia and Lithuania was signed on July 12, 1920. Article One read in part as follows:

"Proceeding from the right of all peoples to free self-determination up to and including complete secession, proclaimed by the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Russia unconditionally recognises the independence of the Lithu-

anian state with all the ensuing legal consequences of this recognition and, motivated by goodwill, rescinds forever all Russia's sovereign rights regarding the Lithuanian nation and its territory.

"The fact of Lithuania's former dependence on Russia places no obligations as regards Russia upon the Lithuanian nation or its territory."¹¹

The peace treaty with the RSFSR was of historic importance to the Lithuanian state as it was the first international legal act to recognise its independence. The economic provisions of the treaty were also very important to Lithuania. In light of the miserable state of the Lithuanian economy, the Soviet government agreed to provide the Lithuanian government with 3,000,000 roubles in gold. It also granted Lithuania logging concessions on the territory of the RSFSR. The Soviet government returned all of Lithuania's historical and cultural values that had ended up on Russian territory.

Furthermore, Soviet Russia recognised Lithuania's rights to the city of Vilna* and the surrounding region, which had been captured by Poland during a counter-revolutionary attack on Lithuania in the autumn of 1919 and liberated by the Red Army in July 1920, and, accordingly, turned them over to Lithuania. The Vilna region had a territory of 9,546 square kilometres and a population of almost 600,000.¹²

Vilna (Vilnius) had been the capital since the times of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. True, bourgeois Lithuania failed to keep Vilnius and its region intact. On October 9, 1920, the Polish general Zeligowski re-captured them, and they were annexed by Poland. Years later, again with the help of Soviet Russia, Lithuania managed to restore its sovereignty over its capital.

The Soviet government attached primary significance to the reciprocal obligation recorded in Article Four of the Peace Treaty:

"The two Contracting Parties pledge themselves:

"1. To prevent the formation or presence on their territory of governments, organisations or groups intending to wage an armed struggle against the other Contracting Party. Also, to prevent within the limits of their territory the recruiting and mobilisation of troops into the armies of said governments,

* The name of the city of Vilnius prior to 1939.

organisations or groups, and the presence of their representatives or officials.”¹³

Soviet Russia was the first to recognise the independence of the Lithuanian Republic. The Western powers, including the United States, followed suit later, though their recognition was not sincere, as it was accompanied by a series of demands limiting Lithuania’s sovereignty. Certain political groups in the West are still trying, under all kinds of pretexts, to galvanise the so-called “Baltic problem”, which the peoples of Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia solved long ago.

Part II.

The Bourgeois Republic: Up the Down Staircase

The Dictatorship of the Bourgeoisie

In 1919 the joint forces of foreign and internal counter-revolution defeated Soviet government in Lithuania. The people, especially active supporters of the Bolshevik slogans, had to pay dearly when the bourgeois order was restored. Many revolutionaries were executed without trial, among them the revolutionary writer Vladas Rekašius and the teachers S. Grybas and D. Šeputa. On the Pakreunys estate, in the Rokiškis area, the military authorities sentenced 130 citizens to death for having worked at Soviet institutions. The executions took place right there, in a wood. In the Seda area, over 200 people were tortured to death. The village of Suvekas, in the Zarasai area, was burned down for having supported Soviet government.¹⁴

This was a dictatorship of the nationalist bourgeoisie, which forced the Communists to go underground. Reprisals, however, were directed not only against the Communists and other active supporters of Soviet government, but against democratically-minded trade-union activists too; and they continued even after the constitution was enacted and the First Sejm was convened in 1922. However, because the Sejm included many representatives of the opposition parties, it was dissolved ahead of schedule. All workers’ candidates running for the Second Sejm, about 100 persons in all, were arrested shortly before the elections.

The political crackdown was accompanied by economic troubles. Following the establishment of

the bourgeois dictatorship, there was a break in the historically established economic ties between Lithuania and Russia. As a result, Lithuania lost raw materials and fuel supplies for its industry as well as a major market for its industrial products.

In proportion of the population engaged in trade and industry, Lithuania ranked last in Europe.¹⁵ Although the development of capitalist relations enabled it to achieve a substantial increase in industrial output from 1920 to 1939, this increase concerned primarily consumer goods. Over the twenty years, the output of means of production rose by only ten per cent.¹⁶

The agrarian reform in Lithuania led to a dramatic polarisation in the countryside. In 1930, 153,000 farms under 10 hectares each accounted for a total of 746,000 hectares of land, whereas 28,600 landlords and *kulaks* (possessing 30 or more hectares of land) owned 1.5 million hectares of farmland.¹⁷ Although Lithuanian farm produce was marketed in Western Europe (primarily in Britain and Germany, which in turn were the leading exporters of goods to Lithuania), the economic prosperity promised by the bourgeois politicians was somewhat of a mirage.

The living standards of the majority of people were deteriorating. At the same time, foreign debts, especially military debts, continued to grow. In 1932, when Lithuania's foreign debt was the largest, the republic owed the West 160.5 million lits* in loans alone.¹⁸ Meanwhile, according to incomplete data, foreign capital earned 66.4 million lits in interest payments and profits in Lithuania between 1924 and 1934.¹⁹ Lithuania became heavily dependent on foreign capital, and unemployment grew steadily. As a result, emigration increased. In some years the high rate of emigration ate up most of the natural population growth in Lithuania. All told, during the years of the bourgeois republic, some 80,000 people left the country.^{**} The reason was obvious: the Lithuanian economy was not developing in the interests of the poorer sections of the population. Indeed, in the years of bourgeois government more than 40,000 farmsteads were sold by auction.²¹

The deplorable economic situation, quite naturally, had a most negative impact on politics. The nationalist bourgeoisie increas-

* The monetary unit of Lithuania as a bourgeois republic.

** Some sources estimate the number of emigrants between 1929 and 1939 at 100,000.²⁰

ingly speculated on the "expediency" of introducing a "tougher" form of government. In 1926 there was a coup d'état in Lithuania.

December 17, 1926

Christian Democrats were in power in Lithuania until early in the summer of 1926. During their rule, martial law remained in force in the country, and labour organisations were cruelly persecuted. The fall of the Christian Democrats became evident during the elections to the Third Sejm when they found themselves in the minority.

A more liberal coalition government of the Social Democrats and the Liaudininkai party*, victorious in the elections to the Third Sejm, carried out a number of democratic reforms which gave an immediate impetus to working-class struggles. In reply, right-wing groups began to castigate the Parliamentary system of government. One of the Tautininkai** leaders claimed that the threat of Bolshevism was growing in Lithuania and that it was necessary to follow Mussolini's example.²²

Reactionaries were outraged when the coalition government signed a non-aggression pact with the Soviet Union on September 28, 1926. The right-wing parties were against any normalisation of relations with the USSR.

On the night of December 16, 1926, the Christian Democrats and the Tautininkai party seized power with the support of reactionary army officers. The Tautininkai leaders, Antanas Smetona and Augustinas Voldemaras, became President and Prime Minister, respectively. Soon afterwards, the Christian Democrats were eliminated from government. The Tautininkai rulers dissolved the Sejm, and in 1928 enacted a new constitution consolidating power in the President's hands. In 1934 they banned all trade unions, and in 1936, all the opposition political parties. Essentially, this was a fascist putsch, and it was followed by fascist methods of government.

Soviet researchers summed up the Smetona regime in a fundamental study called "The 1940 Socialist Revolutions in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia":

* The Liaudininkai: a liberal bourgeois party.

** The Tautininkai: the most extreme right-wing bourgeois party.

"In Lithuania, fascism did not have a broad social base. The Tautininkai party was not large. It is little wonder, then, that they had representatives in neither the First nor the Second Sejm. They managed to win three seats only in the Third Sejm. The reactionary dictatorship of the Lithuanian bourgeoisie lacked some of the classical elements of fascism peculiar to Italy, Germany and some other countries. But the fascist essence of the regime established in Lithuania in 1926 shone through very clearly in the way it protected the interests of the big bourgeoisie, in its cruel treatment of the Communist Party and labour organisations, and in how it destroyed the legal opposition and all more or less democratic organisations. In a bid to undermine the unity of the working people, the Tautininkai rulers preached nationalism and chauvinism, extolling Smetona as the 'leader' of the nation, and resorting to fascist social demagogic about 'the unity of the nation', 'a class peace', etc."²³ In fact, the Smetona regime was aping Italian fascism.

The USSR: A Firm Course Towards Strengthening Good-neighbourly Relations with Lithuania

Throughout the twenty years of their rule, none of the leaders of bourgeois Lithuania had any feelings of congeniality for the Soviet Union. However, they were forced to reckon with a number of objective factors, including such feelings on the part of the Lithuanian people, as well as unfailing Soviet support for the independence of the Lithuanian state and, finally, the fact that the country was unable to resist Poland's, let alone Germany's, claims to its territory without the support of a major power. The Soviet Union had always provided this support. It was in the Soviet Union's national interests that neighbouring Lithuania retained its sovereignty and territorial integrity.

On September 28, 1926, the Soviet Union and Lithuania signed a treaty on non-aggression and neutrality in Moscow. This was based on the principles recorded in the 1920 Treaty. Under the 1926 Treaty, the two sides pledged:

"To respect under all circumstances each other's sovereignty,

territorial integrity, and inviolability"; "to refrain from any aggressive actions against the other side"; "not to furnish support to any third power or powers against the other Contracting Party"; and not to participate in agreements or coalitions of third powers when such coalitions are aimed at "subjecting any of the Contracting Parties to economic or financial boycott."²⁴

The Soviet Union reconfirmed Lithuania's sovereignty over the city of Vilna and the adjacent region. The last point received particular emphasis in a Soviet government note in connection with the signing of the treaty.²⁵

The Soviet-Lithuanian Treaty of 1926 also provided a basis for normalising economic relations between the two countries.

The treaty was so important that the two sides extended it on two occasions (in 1931 and 1934).

In 1933 and 1934, in an effort to secure peace in Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union proposed to Poland, and later to Germany, that joint declarations be made concerning the Baltic states. The draft declaration proposed to Poland read as follows:

"The USSR and Poland hereby jointly declare their firm resolution to protect and defend peace in the East of Europe. Both states consider that the necessary condition of this peace should be the inviolability and full economic and political independence of the countries of new political formations that have emerged from the former Russian Empire, and that this independence is an object of concern for both states. In the event of a threat to the independence of the Baltic countries, the USSR and Poland promise to enter into immediate contact and discussion of the situation."²⁶

In early February 1934, the Polish government announced that it was not interested in continuing negotiations on this issue. In April Germany also turned down the Soviet proposal.

On April 4, 1934, Maxim Litvinov, People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, spoke to the envoys of the Baltic countries in Moscow, following the extension of the non-aggression pacts between the USSR and those countries, including Lithuania. He said, in part:

"Today we took care of the pacts which were to have expired in only eighteen months' time. The prescheduled repayment of a loan testifies to both the goodwill and the fine financial position of the recipient of the loan. In this instance, our governments' early concern for the pacts that were to remain effective for quite

a long time testifies to their goodwill and strong peaceloving tendencies. This is also proved by the speed, unmatched in the history of diplomacy, with which the Soviet government's initiative was put into effect. Our government suggested extending the pacts only on March 20; several days later your governments replied, and this was a straightforward, unconditional and positive reply; and today, only two weeks later, the matter has been settled.

"Our joint action has been undertaken and completed at a time when the international situation is being constantly aggravated. Day in and day out, there have been statements, spoken and written, about the threat of war hanging over all the five parts of the world, but hardly anything is being said about the possibility and ways of sparing humanity from this disaster. Governments and statesmen are taking a somewhat fatalist attitude, regarding it as something inevitable. They can think only of general re-armament, which is equivalent to the arms race that, far from preventing, has only stimulated wars in the past. May the modest act we signed today remind the world that there are states that consider it their international goal to strengthen peace in general or at least in that region where they have some degree of control over it..."²⁷

The importance of the event became even more evident after Germany and Poland made a declaration of non-aggression on January 26, 1934. It became known that Germany was planning to divide the Baltic region with Poland, that it was going to seize Klaipeda, and that it viewed positively Polish plans to gain access to the Baltic Sea through the territory of the Baltic countries.

From 1933 to 1935, the Soviet government made energetic efforts to establish an Eastern Pact from among countries opposed to Hitler's expansion or under threat of this expansion, including Lithuania. Relations between Lithuania and Germany deteriorated, particularly in 1934 and 1935 in connection with the Klaipeda problem. Lithuania's government agreed to join the Eastern Pact, provided Lithuania's rights to Vilnius were not revised, and Latvia and Estonia joined it too. Unfortunately, Latvia and Estonia were among the countries that frustrated efforts to set up an Eastern Pact as a major element of a system of collective security in Europe. This was a sad development for Lithuania, as there were two "claimants" to its land—bourgeois Poland and Nazi Germany.

The Polish-Lithuanian Crisis of 1938

So, as we have seen, Lithuania's independence and territorial integrity came under a double threat—from Nazi Germany and Poland. Poland was occupying the Vilna region of Lithuania centred in the city of Vilna (Vilnius), the historical capital of the Lithuanian state. Soviet Russia had returned the region to Lithuania in 1920 after it was liberated by the Red Army, but Polish forces soon re-captured it from Lithuania. The Soviet Union repeatedly stated that it did not recognise this as a lawful solution to the problem.

After Vilnius was seized from Lithuania in 1920, no official relations between Lithuania and Poland were maintained. The line of demarcation* separating Lithuania from the Vilnius region and all of Poland remained closed. In the mid-1930s the Polish militarists again decided to pressure Lithuania into settling relations with Poland on the basis of the status quo. In addition to unofficial negotiations on the normalisation of relations (1933-1938), there was a chauvinistic anti-Lithuanian propaganda campaign in Poland, with anti-Lithuanian demonstrations and various other activities along the line of demarcation. Nazi Germany's aggressive policies created even greater tension.

On March 11, 1938, the day when German forces crossed into Austria, there was another border incident between Poland and Lithuania. Poland was going to present Lithuania with an ultimatum. If Lithuania rejected it, Poland planned to unleash an armed attack. Germany was making similar preparations.

In a note drawn up for Hitler on March 17, Joachim von Ribbentrop, Germany's Foreign Minister, said that Germany was not interested in Poland's seizure of Lithuania. In the event of a Polish-Lithuanian conflict, he wrote, "I consider it necessary to occupy the territory of Klaipeda in the first few hours. The requisite preparations have been carried out."²⁸

Germany was planning to occupy not only Klaipeda but a large region in western Lithuania. Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the German armed forces high command, drew up a special map with a proposed line of demarcation between German and Polish

* From 1928 onward, following talks with Poland, it was called an administrative line in Lithuania.

forces crossing Lithuanian territory.²⁹ In this way, a conflict with Poland threatened Lithuania with a simultaneous attack both from Poland and from Germany.

The Western powers advised the Lithuanian government to accept the ultimatum. Joseph E. Davies, the American Ambassador to the Soviet Union, wrote the following about the feelings of Jurgis K. Baltrušaitis, Lithuania's envoy to the Soviet Union: "His confidence in the Soviet government's protection was his only hope."³⁰

On March 16, 1938, Maxim Litvinov, People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, summoned the Polish Ambassador in Moscow. In a telegram to Soviet representatives abroad, he wrote: "On March 16, I called in the Polish Ambassador and told him that, without expressing our appraisal of the Polish-Lithuanian dispute, we are interested in seeing it settled in an exclusively peaceful way and that the use of force might create a danger to all of Eastern Europe."³¹

As soon as news about the Polish ultimatum reached Moscow, Maxim Litvinov again summoned the Polish Ambassador in the USSR on March 18. The following is Litvinov's record of the conversation:

"I told Grzybowski that... as a sovereign state Lithuania has the right to independently determine its relations with Poland. We will not meddle when this is done perfectly voluntarily, without coercion, and without infringement on Lithuanian independence.

"...With this ultimatum Poland is seeking not only the establishment of diplomatic relations but, evidently, complete, unconditional renunciation by Lithuania of its stand as concerns the Vilna region and other disputed problems. Such demands, especially presented in the form of an ultimatum, are tantamount to the rape of Lithuania, and I have already told the Ambassador about our interest in the preservation of the Lithuanian state's full independence..."³²

The Soviet Union's support of Lithuania had its effect. In its ultimatum, Poland demanded that diplomatic representatives with Lithuania be exchanged not later than March 31, 1938, and notes about the establishment of diplomatic relations be exchanged within 48 hours after the ultimatum was presented. The ultimatum did not demand that Lithuania give up its rights to Vilnius.

On March 20, after Lithuania had accepted the ultimatum, Maxim Litvinov again met the Polish Ambassador and stressed

that the Soviet Union was interested in having "Lithuania retain its full independence not just in name but in fact"³³.

Lithuania's government agreed to the Polish ultimatum.

The Soviet Union's positive role in protecting Lithuanian interests was acknowledged by the Polish Foreign Minister when he spoke to Hans Adolf von Moltke, German Ambassador to Poland, on April 9, 1938. The Minister said that "it had also been possible on the occasion of the Lithuanian crisis to expose certain intrigues by other countries." When the Ambassador asked him whether he meant Russia, the Minister answered that "it was mainly a question of Russia."³⁴

The Polish-Lithuanian crisis of 1938 was the first serious foreign-policy trial for the Lithuanian government in the new conditions, which were fraught with the threat of a universal military conflict, conditions that had evolved after Hitler's rise to power.

The Polish-Lithuanian crisis, however, was not the only foreign-policy trial for Lithuania's independence.

The Source of the Main Threat

Back in 1932, Hitler said in an address to Nazi Party leaders:

"We will never be able to carry out any great policy without a reliable steel nucleus of power in Central Europe. A nucleus of 80 or 100 million united Germans. My first task is to create such a nucleus that will not only make us invincible but will forever ensure our decisive supremacy over all peoples of Europe.

"That this nucleus includes Austria is obvious.

"It includes Bohemia and Moravia, and the western regions of Poland up to a definite strategic border. It also includes the Baltic states, where for centuries there has been a small domineering layer of Germans. At present the population of those regions is dominated by alien peoples. And it is our duty to banish those peoples, if we are to establish a great power for ages to come."³⁵

Hitler sought to make Lithuania and the other Baltic countries not simply dependent on Germany or even its colonies; he wanted to make them part of Germany proper. Although not all his thoughts along these lines were made public at the time, it was impossible to conceal the general intentions.

Throughout the years of bourgeois rule in Lithuania, Germany tried to make it economically dependent (and not without success). By the end of the 1930s, owing to the Anglo-French policy of "appeasing" the aggressor, the opportunities for German expansion in the Baltic region had increased dramatically. Nazi Germany had concentrated on the so-called "Memel problem".^{*}

The aggressor had already gained some experience in dealing with these kind of "problems". On September 29-30, 1938, a meeting was held at Munich between the British and French Prime Ministers, Chamberlain and Daladier, on the one hand, and Hitler and Mussolini, on the other. In a bid to direct Nazi aggression eastward to the Soviet borders, the British and French leaders, with American approval, gave Hitler a free hand to dismember Czechoslovakia.

How did the Czechoslovak tragedy happen? Germany had stated its claim to Sudetenland, a territory populated by Germans. With the consent of the Western powers, it occupied that region and some other areas of the independent state. Later it repaid its allies with pieces of Czechoslovak territory. What was left of the formerly independent country after the "dissection" fell into Nazi Germany's hands and the country's resources became a subsidiary of the Reich economy. This created a springboard for aggression against the next country on the Nazi list. And all this was taking place in peacetime.

A short time later, a similar scenario began to be acted out with regard to Lithuania. The role of Sudetenland was now given to the Klaipeda region.

The Lithuanian people knew which way the wind was blowing. In the autumn of 1938, Lithuania's State Security Department admitted that large numbers of Lithuanians "had quite strong feelings against Germany".³⁶ But the sentiments of ordinary Lithuanians towards their own government were no better. In a

* Memel was the official name of Klaipeda before 1923. Lithuania's territory around Klaipeda had been seized by Germany during the centuries of its expansion to the east. After Germany's defeat in the First World War, under Article 99 of the Treaty of Versailles, the Klaipeda region was detached from Germany and, on behalf of the Entente countries, was placed under French rule. In early 1923 Lithuania succeeded in restoring its sovereignty over the region, though not in full. On May 8, 1924, French, British, Italian and Japanese representatives signed the Memel (Klaipeda) Convention at Paris, which envisaged broad autonomy for the region. Its population consisted largely of ethnic Germans—the result of centuries of Germanisation. Germany immediately used Klaipeda's autonomy to step up its influence there.

leaflet, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania accused the Smetona government of "making one concession after another to Nazi Germany and its agents inside the country in the field of both foreign and domestic policy".³⁷

The accusation was not groundless, as events later showed.

After Munich, Germany increased pressure on Lithuania to make it agree to the demands of the Klaipeda Germans, which in effect would have given them the reins of power and freedom to carry out Nazi activity (by the way, these demands had originated in Berlin).

On October 31, 1938, Jurgis Šaulys, Lithuanian envoy to Berlin, informed the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Lithuania was accepting all of Germany's demands concerning Klaipeda.

Local Nazis immediately began staging demonstrations under Hitler's slogan "One Nation, One State, One Führer".

Lithuania found itself in an extremely difficult situation. The Western countries had turned away from it, as they had turned away from Czechoslovakia some time earlier. Lithuania's Baltic allies—the bourgeois governments of Latvia and Estonia—saw their main enemy in the Soviet Union and, in an effort to facilitate the establishment of a united anti-Soviet front in Eastern Europe, advised Lithuania to comply with Polish, and especially German, demands.

There was only one country on which Lithuania could rely in military and political matters. The Soviet Union was genuinely interested in having Lithuania retain its independence—it had repeatedly affirmed this. But the Smetona regime, guided by its ideological prejudices and political antipathies towards the USSR, refused to take this reasonable step.

Thereby, the Lithuanian government had preserved nothing in its foreign policy stock-in-trade but subservience and shameful capitulation to Hitler. On December 5, Smetona reorganised the government.

The aim of the reorganisation was to move "closer to Germany", as Lithuania hurriedly informed the aggressor.

On December 6, General Raštikis, Commander-in-Chief of the Lithuanian Army, made the following statement to Germany's military attaché:

"The Cabinet shift is intended to place in key positions men who are able to pave the way for agreement and friendship with Germany..."

"Lithuania is resolved to settle the Memel question, which has always been an obstacle to real rapprochement and friendship between Germany and Lithuania, in the German sense... Lithuania is further prepared to negotiate with Germany on concessions going beyond the Memel statute... Lithuania could not give up the Memel Territory entirely..."³⁸

That same day, Joseph Urbšys, Lithuanian Foreign Minister, told Erich Wilhelm Zechlin, German Minister in Lithuania:

"With regard to general policy Lithuania would like to learn the wishes of the Germans, adapt herself to them, and also guarantee their fulfilment."³⁹

In early 1939, Vilius Bertulaitis, the man second in command of the German Nazi organisations of the Klaipeda region, was made chairman of a new regional administration. However, this no longer satisfied the aggressor. After the Czechoslovak state was eliminated on March 15, 1939, the Klaipeda Germans raised the question of uniting the region with Germany. On March 20, a meeting of the Lithuanian Cabinet chaired by Smetona decided to use armed force in the event of unrest among the Klaipeda Germans. Should Germany provide military support for the insurgents, the Lithuanian forces were to withdraw from the region without putting up any resistance.⁴⁰

On March 20, Joachim von Ribbentrop, German Foreign Minister, demanded that the Klaipeda region be added to the Reich. He said that if German blood were shed in the area, the German army would intervene, and there was no telling where it would stop.⁴¹

On March 21, the Lithuanian Cabinet declared that "it considers itself compelled to accept the demands of the German government".⁴²

On March 22, 1939, one week after Czechoslovakia was deprived of its independence, Lithuania and the German Reich signed a treaty making the Klaipeda region part of Germany. The treaty stated, in part:

"Article 1. The Klaipeda region*, annexed from Germany by the Treaty of Versailles, is being re-united with the German Reich as of today.

"Article 2. Lithuania's military and political forces shall be

* The treaty, dictated by Germany, interpreted the history of the problem accordingly.

evacuated from the Klaipeda region immediately. The Lithuanian government shall see to it that in the course of the evacuation the Klaipeda region remains in a state of order..."⁴³

The emerging situation was analysed in an appeal from the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Lithuania on March 23, 1939:

"Nazi Germany has seized the Klaipeda region. It is preparing to attack all of Lithuania, as the Czechoslovak example shows that Hitler is not content with the so-called German regions alone; he is grabbing everything he can grab and is allowed to grab. Besides, in his aggressive policy Hitler is showing contempt for all treaties and obligations. That is why, despite the treaty signed now, which purportedly recognises Lithuania's new borders, there is a daily threat that Lithuania may lose its independence...

"It is necessary to strive for a military alliance of the Baltic

March 22, 1939. The Lithuanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Joseph Urbšys and German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop sign a treaty turning the Klaipeda region over to Germany.



countries to oppose the threat of German occupation; to use Poland, since it is against the German occupation of Lithuania; and especially to rely on the Soviet Union, which has repeatedly helped to defend Lithuania's independence."⁴⁴

Now, what did France and Britain do as signatories to the Memel Convention to protect Lithuania?

Back on December 13, 1938, Lithuania's envoy, B.K. Balutis, sent the following message to the Lithuanian Foreign Ministry after probing the issue in London: "We should expect nothing of the British except diplomatic support."⁴⁵ The British and French views were summed up more accurately in a memorandum of Werner von Grundherr, Head of the Sixth Political Division in the German Foreign Ministry, dated February 28, 1939:

"Signatory powers of the Memel Convention have shown no interest in the Memel question in the past weeks."⁴⁶

The day that Lithuania's government received the German ultimatum, it appealed to Britain and France, asking what actions they might undertake if the Klaipeda region were forcibly taken by Germany. By way of reply they refused to take any action at all.⁴⁷ It was quite clear, however, which way the situation was developing. Hans Frohwein, German Minister in Estonia, informed Berlin that the Germans in Estonia and especially Latvia were of the opinion that "the annexation of the Baltic countries is simply a matter of time".⁴⁸

This much was obvious not only to the Germans but to the Balts themselves, especially diplomats. The Latvian mission in Belgium concluded:

"...Nobody believes that Germany will stop at the borders of the Klaipeda region; as soon as the situation permits, it will go further. Lithuania's future is now considered as good as decided, and a similar opinion is evolving with regard to Latvia."⁴⁹

The danger of Hitler's policy to Lithuania was certainly realised by the Lithuanian military—men who had pledged to fight in defence of their country. Some of them had come up with sober-minded appraisals of the prevailing situation and the prospects for keeping Lithuania independent amidst a ripening military conflict in Europe. Here is the concluding part of a secret report filed to the Lithuanian government by the army command, signed by the Commander-in-Chief, General Raštikis, in May 1937:

"In concluding this report, I would like to mention briefly a

situation that has not yet been discussed, a situation in which Lithuania would find itself in the event of a war between the Soviet Union and Germany.

"It's difficult to imagine such a war involving Poland. It is unimportant which side Poland would take: there is too little hope that the war would by-pass our territory. Most likely, our territory would be turned into a battlefield.

"Well before this war, Lithuania should decide which side to take, since fighting against the first to attack our territory would be tantamount to trusting our fate to chance.

"In principle, Lithuania ought to support the side that will have a better chance of winning the war, though it is obvious that Lithuania would have little chance of retaining its independence in the event of German victory. Hence, Lithuania will have to act together with countries that resent German expansion (the Soviet Union, the Baltic countries, Poland, the Little Entente, Britain, and France)."⁵⁰

It is noteworthy that the secret report did not indentify the Soviet Union as a potential enemy but rather, in effect, named it first among countries on whom Lithuania could depend for its independence. This was a legitimate conclusion, considering the Soviet Union's untiring efforts to maintain friendly relations with Lithuania. But the ruling groups of bourgeois Lithuania ignored the sober-minded opinion of the military. The ideological hostility of the Smetona government to the USSR got the upper hand.

On the Threshold of a World War

The Baltic governments became increasingly dependent on Berlin, refusing to recognise the threat facing them. They fixed their "rapprochement" with Germany diplomatically. On June 7, 1939, Estonia and Latvia signed non-aggression pacts with Germany hoping that this would guarantee their security. The Baltic governments fell for the idea of "Baltic neutrality" in a would-be military conflict. The Germans supported this idea, but to what end? Peter von Kleist, of the Ribbentrop entourage, owned up:

"In the Baltic States we want to achieve the same objective in a different way. There will be no use of force, no pressure or threats... By this method we shall bring about the neutrality of the

Baltic states, that is, their definite alienation from the Soviet Union.”⁵¹

This being the case, no “Baltic neutrality” could guarantee security for Lithuania. In fact, there remained ever fewer such guarantees for other countries. All attempts of the Soviet Union to reach an agreement with Britain and France about building up a reliable front against the aggressor had proved in vain; London and Paris were looking for a way to direct German aggression to the east.

By the end of August 1939, the last opportunity to avert World War Two had been forfeited: Britain and France had effectively scuttled negotiations with the Soviet Union to conclude a military convention. The Soviet Union was forced to seek other ways of ensuring the security of its borders. When Berlin proposed a non-aggression pact, it chose to take that step in order to postpone the imminent war with Germany.

But the Soviet government refused to pay for the country’s temporary security by agreeing to Nazi terror against the Baltic peoples, the Western Ukrainians and the Western Byelorussians. Besides, a German advance to the Soviet frontiers following large-scale military actions against the Baltic countries would have resulted in an extremely dangerous situation fraught with a conflict that the Soviet Union sought to avoid by signing the non-aggression pact.

As it was unable to stop German aggression in Europe alone, the Soviet government took measures to restrain it. To this end, it made the signing of the pact contingent on German recognition of the Soviet Union’s strategic interest in preventing any German interference in the affairs of the Baltic countries and in the former Soviet territories populated by Ukrainians and Byelorussians, which Poland had captured during the 1920 intervention.

The Soviet government’s determined stand over the signing of the Soviet-German pact made it possible to arrest Hitler’s eastward aggression for the time being. Consequently, it staved off the horrors of German occupation for millions of people and strengthened the strategic position of the Soviet Union and all other states that were to become members of the anti-Hitler coalition. For the Baltic countries, including Lithuania, the pact provided guarantees from immediate enslavement by Germany. This played a tremendous role in the further development of events in the region.

Part III.

The People Make Their Choice

Patience Wears Thin

The fact that the Lithuanian fascists came to power not as a mass movement but by way of conspiracy affected both the internal and the foreign policy of the Smetona regime. Aware of its weak social base, the Tautinikai party manoeuvred constantly, flirting with the people and then showering them with reprisals.

As fascists came to power in other countries, Lithuania’s internal life grew increasingly fascist. Forced labour camps appeared where people were placed not only by court ruling but by administrative order—“for correction”. Many progressive Lithuanians, Communists first and foremost, were jailed. According to incomplete data, 2,367 persons, including 1,622 Communists, were tried for revolutionary or anti-fascist activities between 1927 and 1940.⁵² Many more people were carted off to camps and prisons by administrative order.

The Tautininkais failed to become a mass party. In early 1938 they numbered only 13,000, with another 2,000 or so seeking membership. The overwhelming majority of them (over 90 per cent) were members of the bourgeoisie, the salaried class, and the reactionary intelligentsia.⁵³ There was no unity among the fascists. In 1927, for example, a semi-legal military organisation by the name of Geležinis Vilkas (Iron Wolf) sprang up and was led by the Prime Minister, Augustinas Voldemaras, who wanted to become a Lithuanian dictator himself. Apprehensive of Voldemaras’ ambitions, Smetona ousted him and later

disbanded the "wolves" after failing to subordinate them to himself. Voldemaras repeatedly tried to seize power with the help of his supporters from among reactionary army officers. In 1934 he even attempted a coup d'état.

The Smetona regime was weakened by the anti-fascist protests of the people and by the power struggle within the ruling elite. It continued to manoeuvre and was forced to resort to more and more demagogic steps in order to control industrial strikes, peasants' protests and anti-fascist demonstrations, and to boost its international prestige. In 1936 it held elections to a new Sejm. The new electoral law substantially limited the number of voters (the voting age was 24 years, and residence and other restrictive qualifications were also applied). The result of the elections, which took place in flagrantly undemocratic conditions, was that 42 out of the 49 members of the new Sejm, which had only consultative status, were representatives of the Tautininkai party. The voter turn-out was low—a mere 68 per cent.⁵⁴

The regime's economic policy was ineffectual. In 1933 there were about 50,000 unemployed in the towns, and in 1940, as many as 70,000. Economists estimated that surplus labour in Lithuanian farming amounted to 200,000 or 300,000 people.⁵⁵ This in a country of three million people.

In such conditions, the working class naturally had to wage an endless struggle, which it generally did under Communist leadership. Communists at that time, however, did not constitute a decisive political force. At the end of 1929, for instance, the Communist Party had only 750 members.⁵⁶ Yet its strength lay not in its numbers but in the fact that its policy and struggle were in the interests of the Lithuanian people, especially working people. Furthermore, many soldiers and even officers were also resentful of the regime.

Throughout the 1930s, the Smetona regime was shaken by recurring large-scale protests of the working class (especially in Kaunas, the Lithuanian capital at that time). In 1935 there was a wave of peasant disturbances. In June 1936, the Kaunas workers held a general political strike.

The economic situation had deteriorated dramatically by early 1939, causing another outbreak of popular discontent. In January 1939, the workers of Kaunas addressed a petition to the Minister of the Interior:

"We, the undersigned, call to your attention, Mr. Minister, our

worsened living conditions. While the cost of living has risen by 40 per cent (housing, fuel, food, etc.), wages have remained virtually unchanged since 1933."⁵⁷

Even ranking officials of Lithuania's State Security Department could not fail to recognize the workers' plight and the just nature of their grievances:

"...The winter is hard on ordinary workers as there is no permanent employment. The workers are experiencing hard times as a result of this absence; they and their families are suffering from cold and hunger. The workers will be opposed to any government that does not provide them with permanent jobs..."⁵⁸

(*From a survey of state security bodies and the criminal police. January 10, 1939*)

"Generally speaking, the Communist Party has been making every effort to win the confidence of the broad working-class masses and build up its influence among them. The Communist Party is seeking to gain the workers' trust through all kinds of economic slogans. It must be noted that as a result of its propaganda, the Communist Party has become very popular among the workers."⁵⁹

(*From a survey of the intelligence division of the State Security Department. June 1939*)

"The events of the past days* have shown that Communist agitation is being well received by our workers. Many workers that used to have nothing to do with Communist activities are now responding to Communist influence. Speaking of the current sentiments among the workers, one noted Communist leader remarked that the workers' mood now is such that they throng to demonstrations of their own accord... It must be noted that this appraisal does not exaggerate the situation too much... There is reason enough for a strike to be provoked, as the workers' economic position has worsened considerably..."⁶⁰

(*From a bulletin of the State Security Department. October 16, 1939*)

"This is how staple-food prices per kilogram have climbed (figures follow).

* On October 11-12, 1939, workers' rallies were held in many parts of Lithuania in thanks to the Soviet Union for liberating Vilnius and the Vilnius region and handing them over to Lithuania. See further below.

"From this we can see that the workers' grievances are well-grounded."⁶¹

(*From a bulletin of the State Security Department. October 20, 1939*)

"Communists have recently become more active in the area. For this reason, many of them have been sent to a forced labour institution in the past few days. According to the State Security Department, it is likely that the Communists will try to expand their activities, so it will be necessary to send even more of them to the forced labour institution. It is expected that the number of the newly detained will be around 300.

"Since the forced labour institution is overcrowded and cannot accommodate that number of detainees, I ask you, Mr. Minister, to order new barracks to be built more quickly."⁶²

(*A report from K. Svilas, Head of the Police Department, to the Minister of the Interior. October 25, 1939*)

"The economic position of the workers has grown much worse of late... The workers have been hit particularly hard by increases in food prices. They believe that the press is conniving with the traders. One week it was reported that bread and flour prices would not rise, and the next week it was reported that these foods had become more expensive. Sugar prices, too, have been raised without good reason, as the increase was said to correspond to that of foreign sugar prices, while in fact the latter are much lower..."

"Communist Party and other anti-state agents are effectively relying on the workers' discontent in their propaganda. Since they are using convincing arguments, they are meeting with widespread support on the part of the workers..."⁶³

(*From a bulletin of the State Security Department. March 11, 1940*)

The Lithuanian workers were among the most exploited in the world. This was acknowledged even in Lithuania's bourgeois press. On July 11, 1934, the newspaper *Lieutuvos aidas* reported:

"There are bakeries in which the workers are forced to work for 18 to 20 hours a day, being allowed only two to four hours of sleep and rest. They work in unsanitary conditions, with no leaves. They are given only two days off a year—Easter and Christmas."⁶⁴

Neither the regime itself nor the bourgeois parties did anything to improve the working people's lives. It was only Communists and anti-fascist democrats that campaigned in defence of their interests. Thus, despite repressions, the Communist Party wielded ever greater influence over the workers' movement. Its ranks continued to grow, and by 1936 it already had about 1,900 members.⁶⁵

Powerful protests by workers and peasants became the basis of unity among all the anti-fascist forces in the country. In January 1939, the strategy for creating a united front and the objectives before it were spelled out in a special resolution of a full-scale meeting of the Communist Party Central Committee:

"Smetona's fascist government, which has proclaimed the deceitful slogan of 'national consolidation', is using harsh terror against the entire nation, while overlooking the activities of Lithuania's bitter enemies—the supporters of Hitler and Voldemaras... We must display initiative and act resolutely in order to rally various groups of the Lithuanian population, without distinction of political, national or religious views, to fight for a government in defence of Lithuania, a government that would guarantee Lithuania's independence, give the people freedom, and improve their economic position..."

"...We will furnish support to any movement (including an alliance between the Liaudininkai party and the Catholics), if it acts against the Voldemaras following, in defence of Lithuania's independence, against the Smetona government's policy of capitulation, and for the freedom and well-being of the people, no matter whether we officially participate in this movement or not..."⁶⁶

Capitalising on the country's problems, the Smetona regime had proclaimed the slogan of "national consolidation" in a bid to strengthen its own position. In 1937, the Communist Party Central Committee adopted a resolution on creating a popular front. The fascist "consolidation" was being opposed by the unity of the anti-fascist forces. The anti-fascist front idea struck a responsive chord in the hearts of hundreds of thousands of Lithuanians. On April 3, 1939, A. Povilaitis, Head of Lithuania's State Security Department, described the situation in a memorandum:

"The thought of organising this front has already spread throughout the country... The Department deems it necessary to

intervene immediately and stop the establishment of a patriotic front. Any consolidation from below must be prevented until the government makes its own declaration indicating in which direction and on the basis of what principles the consolidation of the nation will proceed. Genuine consolidation should begin from above. If consolidation starts from below (from the mob), the mob will be in control all the time.”⁶⁷

When the government accepted the Polish ultimatum in March 1938, there was general outrage in Lithuania. Faced with a serious crisis, Smetona had to carry out several changes in his Cabinet and finally appointed V. Mironas, a Catholic priest and one of the Tautininkai leaders, as Prime Minister. At the end of 1938, Voldemaras' supporters founded a Union of Lithuanian Activists in Klaipeda, and under its cover started preparations to overthrow the government. The organisation was backed by Germany, which strove to establish an even more pro-Hitler government in Lithuania. Instability within the Union of Lithuanian Activists prevented it from carrying out its plans, though it did evolve into an organisation of paid Nazi agents. On June 29, 1939, Reinhard Heydrich, SS Gruppenführer, wrote to Joachim von Ribbentrop, German Foreign Minister, after receiving a message from the leaders of the Voldemaras movement stating their intention to set up a Nazi party in Lithuania and requesting financial aid and arms supplies. Heydrich wrote: “In my opinion, the request from the followers of Voldemaras for financial assistance could be granted, though under no circumstances should deliveries of arms be made.”⁶⁸

In August 1939, Ernst von Weizsäcker, State Secretary in the German Foreign Ministry, replied to Heydrich “that the Foreign Ministry agreed with the refusal to supply arms but believed that financial aid could be provided through suitable agents to the extent of 2,000 or 3,000 Reichsmarks a quarter.”⁶⁹

This insignificant amount of financial aid to the Lithuanian fascists from Germany is somewhat misleading. For, in fact, the Smetona government's domestic and foreign policies served the German government's interests quite well.

In the meantime, the loss of Klaipeda led to another governmental crisis in Lithuania.

The Christian Democrats and the right wing of the Liaudininkai party decided to support the tottering fascist regime. In late March 1939, the Tautininkai rulers agreed to set up a so-called

government of “joint effort”—a coalition government consisting of four generals (the Prime Minister was General J. Černius), and two representatives from each of the three parties. Though Antanas Smetona remained the dictator, the forced abandonment of absolute Tautininkai rule testified to the crisis of the dictatorship.

The situation was further aggravated by the start of the Second World War (with Germany's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939). The threat to Lithuanian security was growing not by day but hour. Conditions leading to a revolution began to shape up more quickly. The course of events had placed before the people of Lithuania a historic choice.

Threat from the West, Help from the East

Throughout 1939 there was large-scale German penetration into Lithuania. The Smetona regime could not resist the process, nor did it really want to.

In May 1939, Germany and Lithuania signed a number of trade agreements. Its content was revealed in a memorandum by an official of Germany's Economic Policy Department on May 27, 1939:

“1. The reorganisation of trade policy was designed to link the Lithuanian economy as closely as possible to that of the Reich.

“2. The Agreements concluded attained our object of the closest economic integration of Lithuania with the Reich without letting this appear so from without. In reckoning up the planned volume of imports and exports the German share is shown to be thirty per cent of Lithuania's exports and forty per cent of her imports. If to this be added what is further provided for Lithuanian trade with the Protectorate*, and by special agreements, Germany's share appears as fifty per cent of Lithuania's imports and forty per cent of her exports. It is in our interest, in conversations and publications, to avoid in all circumstances presenting these matters in their actual scope.”⁷⁰

On September 1, 1939, the day that Hitler invaded Poland and the Second World War broke out, the Lithuanian government

* The region of Klaipeda.

signed a neutrality act. This was a fruitless attempt to delay or mitigate the imminent German occupation.

On September 20, "an outline of a treaty" with Lithuania was made public in Berlin. Drawn up by the German Foreign Ministry, it envisaged turning Lithuania into a German protectorate:

"Article I. Without prejudice to her independence as a state, Lithuania stands under the protection of the German Reich.

"Article II. In order that this protection may be realised, Germany and Lithuania are concluding a military convention with each other..."

"Substance of the Military Agreement.

"1. The strength, distribution, and equipment of the Lithuanian Army shall be regularly determined in close agreement with the High Command of the Wehrmacht."⁷¹

It took Hitler but a few days to bring Lithuania to the brink of

The Vilnius region, liberated by Red Army units, was turned over to the Lithuanian Republic in accordance with the agreement of October 10, 1939. In the photo: Lithuanian and Soviet troops meet at the administrative line in October 1939.



complete subjugation. In order to reinforce its draft treaty, Germany concentrated its armed forces near Lithuania's borders, ready to seize the country.

Once again, the Soviet Union came to Lithuania's aid.

At the end of September, L. Natkevičius, Lithuanian envoy in the USSR, met with Vyacheslav Molotov, Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars and People's Commissar of Foreign Affairs. The envoy left a record of the conversation:

"Mr. Molotov spoke first. He said that the Soviet Union knew of Lithuania's friendliness towards the USSR and that it was time to make this friendliness more substantial. It was a secret from no one that Germany was seeking to pull Lithuania to its side. Consequently, it was important for the USSR to know with which country Lithuania's sympathies lay. It was not enough then to be either 'warm or cold, it was necessary to reach a decision.'⁷²

Germany had special interests in Lithuania since it occupied a strategic position on a short cut between East Prussia and Moscow. Although at Soviet-German talks in August 1939, Hitler's government promised not to attack Lithuania, it had not abandoned its intention to subordinate it in military and political respects. Germany's plans, like those envisaged in its draft "treaty" with Lithuania, would have deprived Lithuania of its national independence. They also affected the most important aspects of Soviet security. For this reason, when the Soviet-German talks were resumed in September, the Soviet Union insisted that Germany give up its plans concerning Lithuania. Being yet unprepared for a conflict with the USSR, the Berlin government had to satisfy the Soviet demands.

But there was no relying on German promises. Moreover, the Smetona government's concessions to Hitler had created a situation in which Lithuania could hardly honour its commitments under the 1920 Treaty, a fundamental treaty for Soviet-Lithuanian relations. The Klaipeda region, after it was annexed by Germany, had become a major springboard for Hitler's aggressive advances towards east. In late September 1939, the Soviet government proposed that a mutual assistance treaty be signed with Lithuania in order to strengthen its security and, consequently, the Soviet Union's security by deploying Soviet army contingents on Lithuanian territory. After the conclusion of the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, the Smetona regime could no longer count on direct support from Germany in undermining the Soviet

Union's efforts to establish a system of collective security in the Baltic region. The Lithuanian government could not ignore the fact that the sympathies of the overwhelming majority of its population lay with the Soviet Union on which the Lithuanians placed their hopes for national salvation. This being the case, the Lithuanian government had to accept the Soviet proposal.

On October 10, 1939, a Treaty on the Transfer of the City of Vilna and the Vilna Region to the Lithuanian Republic and on Mutual Assistance Between the Soviet Union and Lithuania was signed in Moscow. In accordance with the treaty, Lithuania received the Vilnius region, which had been liberated by the Red Army.* The Soviet move fulfilled the Lithuanian people's dream of restoring their sovereignty over the region of Vilnius. The reunification was fixed in Article 1 of the Treaty. Other articles read as follows:

"Article 2. The Soviet Union and the Lithuanian Republic shall provide all possible assistance to each other, including military assistance, in the event of attack or threat of attack against Lithuania, and also in the event of attack or threat of attack against the Soviet Union via Lithuania's territory by any European power.

"Article 3. The Soviet Union shall furnish assistance to the Lithuanian Army on easy terms with armaments and other war materials.

"Article 4. The Soviet Union and the Lithuanian Republic shall jointly ensure the protection of Lithuania's state borders, to which end the Soviet Union shall have the right to keep a strictly limited number of Soviet ground and air forces in areas of the Lithuanian Republic determined by mutual agreement and at its own expense...

"Article 6. The two Contracting Parties shall not enter into any alliances or participate in any coalitions directed against either of the Contracting Parties.

"Article 7. The implementation of the present Treaty must not

* Vilnius and the Vilnius region, captured by the Polish military from Lithuania in 1920, were again freed by the Red Army on September 19, 1939. This action was undertaken because German forces were quickly advancing to the east, the Polish government was fleeing its country and the threat that Germany might seize the former Soviet territories of the Western Ukraine and Western Byelorussia bordering on the Soviet Union was growing. Vilnius and the Vilnius region were liberated at the same time as those territories were re-united with the Soviet Union.

in any way infringe on the sovereign rights of either Contracting Party, including its state structure, economic and social system and military undertakings. In general, the principle of non-interference in internal affairs shall be observed.

"The deployment areas of the Soviet ground and air forces (Article 4 of the present Treaty) shall remain an integral part of the Lithuanian Republic in all events..."⁷³

The treaty is being recounted here in such detail in order to refute the slanderous accusations common in the West that the Soviet Union concluded the treaty with the aim to occupy Lithuania. In light of Article 7, these allegations appear strange, to say the least. After all, it was the command of the Lithuanian armed forces that had called for accepting Soviet guarantees as early as 1937, i.e., before Poland had presented its ultimatum, before Klaipeda had been annexed, and finally, before the Second World War had begun.

The British and French governments, which had earlier thwarted talks with the Soviet Union on jointly resisting Nazi aggression, began distorting Soviet policy. In the above-mentioned talks, the Soviet government had called for working out collective, not unilateral, security guarantees. On the night of December 11, 1939, Joseph Stalin told Johan Laidoner, Commander-in-Chief of the Estonian Armed Forces:

"As regards the Baltic states, our proposal was that a joint fleet of Britain and France should enter the Baltic Sea, and that Britain and France should conclude an agreement with the Baltic states granting their joint fleet the right to use strongholds in those states (first of all the highly important Estonian and Finnish islands) in order to protect the independence of those states from German aggression and, on the other hand, make a war impossible; in compliance with British and French demands, the Soviet Union's navy, too, would have been prepared to act against the aggressor jointly with the British and French fleet. Such was the genuine proposal of the Soviet Union."⁷⁴

The Soviet position was appreciated most by European nations that had already been enslaved by Hitler and by those under the imminent threat of Nazi occupation. As soon as news of the signing of the treaty with Lithuania in Moscow spread in that

* The conversation was recorded by A. Rey, Estonia's envoy in Moscow, who was present at it.

country, there were mass demonstrations bearing the slogans "Long Live the Soviet Union", "Down with Fascist Rule", "Long Live Free Lithuania".

The fascists tried to present the demonstrations as the people's expression of thanks to the Smetona government for its "wise" policy, which had supposedly resulted in Vilnius being returned to Lithuania. Official speeches failed to acknowledge the Soviet role altogether. But the people were not so easily fooled. On the evening of October 11, thousands of workers and many representatives of the progressive intelligentsia gathered outside the Soviet Embassy in Kaunas to greet a country that once again had intervened on behalf of Lithuania's independence.

Before the Collapse

Faced with a mounting revolutionary movement in the country, Smetona tried to keep his dictatorship afloat by reshuffling his Cabinet. In November 1939, Antanas Merkys, one of the Tautininkai leaders, was appointed Prime Minister. Although the new government still included representatives of the Liudvininkai party and the Christian Democrats, its policy was no different from that of its predecessors.

In 1939 and 1940, Lithuania's economic problems became exacerbated. This was due first and foremost to the loss of the Klaipeda region and in particular the port of Klaipeda, which had brought in much of the foreign trade tax revenue. The government had to raise taxes and cut spending on education, public health and construction. The war had caused a break in trade relations with almost all countries, excluding Germany, which naturally tried to take advantage of Lithuania. According to official and clearly understated data, prices in Lithuania rose by almost 40 per cent between September 1939 and February 1940.⁷⁵

In the autumn of 1939, Lithuania signed a trade treaty with the USSR. If the treaty had been fully realised, it would have given a substantial boost to Lithuania's economy. But the Smetona government was stalling.

In a bid to curb the growing revolutionary movement (the regime was no longer capable of crushing it altogether), the government stepped up repressive measures. At the end of 1939 and in the first half of 1940, some 660 Communists and other

participants in the revolutionary movement were incarcerated in jails or forced labour camps. Nine of the fourteen members of the Communist Party Central Committee residing in Lithuania were imprisoned.⁷⁶

In the meantime, there were ever more rallies and demonstrations demanding the resignation of the fascist regime, along with slogans calling for an improvement in people's lives. In fact, all the country's entire progressive forces acting both in legal conditions and underground, were rallying around that demand.

The crisis within the ruling Tautininkai party was manifested in a feud between Smetona and the commander of the Lithuanian army, General Raštikis, an energetic man whom some representatives of the bourgeoisie tried to put in Smetona's place. In early 1940, however, Smetona forced Raštikis to retire, replacing him with General Vincas Vitkauskas, a devoted patriot who was opposed, as it later became clear, to the government's pro-Hitler policy.

Years later V. Trumpa, a bourgeois historian, wrote in the Lithuanian emigré magazine *Metmenys* (the article appeared in 1967, having naturally been written from an anti-Soviet position):

"The nation and its leadership never seemed to be so disunited and confused as during the crisis of 1939. There was no unity even in the Cabinet, nor in the army leadership..."⁷⁷

Meanwhile, Smetona and his supporters continued to curry favour with Hitler and even tried to improve relations with Germany by conducting espionage against the Soviet Union. This constituted a blatant violation of the Soviet-Lithuanian treaty.

In February 1940, Smetona sent A. Povilaitis, Head of the State Security Department, to Berlin. The Nazis offered him close collaboration. Following the visit, Lithuanian secret agents began more actively gathering intelligence on Red Army units deployed in some areas of the country in conformity with the Soviet-Lithuanian agreement. The following are excerpts from a letter from the commandant of Vilnius to the mayor (the letter was sent through secret channels on November 18, 1939, before Povilaitis' trip to Berlin):

"I request that you order police-station chiefs to gather information about the Soviet forces on Lithuanian territory in accordance with the following excerpt from the instructions issued by the Second Section of the Staff of the Vilnius Task Force:

On USSR Forces

"Movement of Soviet troops, the composition of the units observed and the direction of the movement, when the observations were made, and by whom.

"Armaments: the exact number and type of artillery pieces, guns, armoured vehicles, and trucks.

"Army units: battalion, regiment, division, corps.

"Troop morale, relations between soldiers, disciplinary measures.

"The attitude of servicemen, especially Soviet officers, to the need for commissars.

"The attitude of Soviet troops to their country's system.

"Meals and uniforms.

"Violations of deployment area boundaries. The time and place of violations, ranks and number of troops, armaments, and the reasons for the violations.

"Aviation activities: flying in what direction and from where, the type and number of aircraft, altitudes...

"Information is to be supplied daily from 0700 to 0800 hours and from 1700 to 1800 hours. Information about substantial deployment changes such as withdrawal of Soviet forces or the appearance of new and particularly mobile forces at the border should be communicated as quickly as possible..."⁷⁸

Clearly, this kind of information involved more than a mere monitoring of Red Army compliance with the terms on which the Soviet forces were deployed in Lithuania.

It was no secret to the Lithuanian military for whom this and other information about the Red Army and the Soviet Union in general was intended. General Vitkauskas later wrote:

"Throughout the first half of 1940, the activities of German spies and agents grew ever broader. Wherever it could, the black hand of the Nazis meddled in Lithuania's political life, spun its 'web', enlisted supporters, incited riots—in a word, did everything possible to involve the Lithuanian people in its intrigues."⁷⁹

On April 17, 1940, Lithuania and Germany signed a new trade treaty, under which the Lithuanian economy was placed entirely at the service of the aggressor. Further military and political consultations between the countries of the Baltic Entente (Lithu-

ania, Latvia and Estonia)* ensued. It had become clear that the three pro-Nazi governments, which had mutual assistance treaties with the Soviet Union, were negotiating a military agreement, that is, a military alliance against the USSR.

The Lithuanian rulers' provocations against the USSR reached such an extent that Red Army soldiers began to be abducted. They were interrogated about the state of the Soviet armed forces. General Vitkauskas wrote in his memoirs:

"The provocations could be traced to the bourgeois security bodies and the Second Department of the Army Headquarters."⁸⁰

Colonel Šovė, Head of the Third Department of the Lithuanian Army Headquarters, and S. Čenkus, police chief of the Vilnius region, were among the German intelligence agents. With the help of Povilaitis, Head of the State Security Department, German intelligence infiltrated its agents into the Soviet Union via Lithuanian territory. A senior Gestapo officer came to Lithuania repeatedly to obtain information about the Red Army.

On May 25, 1940, the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the USSR protested to the Lithuanian government about the provocations against Soviet soldiers. The Lithuanian government made assurances that the guilty would be punished, but nothing of the kind ever took place. In fact, the incident was used by the Smetona regime to step up repressive measures. Several hundred arrests were made, mostly among workers. Espionage against Red Army units continued.

In the meantime, the anti-fascist movement in the country was gaining momentum. Workers' strikes grew ever more common and increasingly enjoyed support among the petty bourgeoisie and the progressive intelligentsia. Even some of the Army officers realised that the ruling regime could not guarantee Lithuania a future.

The Latvian envoy in Lithuania wrote in a report home that the

* The Baltic Entente was the result of a tripartite treaty between Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia signed on September 12, 1934. At the time the Soviet Union (unlike Germany and Poland) took a positive attitude towards the alliance since it believed, in view of the obviously growing German threat to the independence of those countries, that the Baltic Entente was being set up for the purpose of staving off Nazi aggression. By 1940, however, owing to the Baltic governments' policies, which were detrimental to their own national interests, and as a result of German intrigues, the Baltic Entente had acquired a pronounced anti-Soviet character.

Smetona regime and the dictator himself were in a precarious position:

"He has been able to stay in power only because he is supported by the army and the police... Taking this into account, one cannot but admit that in a state of utter despair Smetona may go so far as to completely subordinate Lithuania to Germany... If I know the President, keeping power may be more important to him than Lithuania's future."⁸¹

The fascist regime in Lithuania was in agony. This had become as clear as day. Everyone realised it, including the dictator.

The Plutocracy Falls

Let us take a cursory look at what was happening at the time in the west, north and south of Europe. Germany had already seized Belgium, Holland, almost all of France, Norway, Denmark, Greece and Yugoslavia. There was no doubt that after he finished his aggression in the west with the complete defeat of France, Hitler would again turn his gaze to the east, towards the Soviet Union. If the Baltic governments, including that of Lithuania, had gone ahead with their policies despite the protests of their peoples, they might have become Hitler Germany's allies and consequently joined in its aggression against the USSR.

Considering this fact, on June 14, 1940, the Soviet government called on Lithuania to abide by the mutual assistance treaty which the Lithuanian side had repeatedly violated. Since provocations against the USSR on Lithuanian territory were taking place with the knowledge and even direct participation of some members of the Cabinet and other highly placed functionaries of the regime, the Soviet Union raised the question of the Lithuanian government's ability to ensure strict implementation of the Soviet-Lithuanian mutual assistance treaty. In view of the growing threat of German aggression, it suggested deploying additional Soviet army units in the country.

On the night of June 14, there was a Cabinet meeting chaired by Smetona. General Vitkauskas, commander of the Lithuanian army, said that given the sentiments of the people, which coincided with those of the army, it was necessary to agree to the Soviet proposals. After lengthy debate, the proposals were accepted by a majority of votes.

On the morning of June 15, the Lithuanian government announced its decision to accept the Soviet proposals. The two countries negotiated an agreement to supervise the entry and deployment of additional contingents of Soviet forces. That same day General Vitkauskas issued an order informing the troops that new Red Army units were arriving. The order stated the need "to show, wherever this is appropriate, that we regard the army of the Soviet Union as a friendly army..."⁸²

These words were indicative of two things. On the one hand, the Lithuanian people appreciated Red Army actions in the face of Hitler's potential invasion. On the other hand, reactionary officers, aware of pro-Nazi sentiments inside the government, might have been seeking a means of provocation.

General Vitkauskas' resolute stand showed him a far-sighted person committed to Lithuania's national interests. Suffice it to mention that at the Cabinet meeting Smetona had suggested resisting the Red Army by armed force and withdrawing Lithuanian troops into Germany. The fact that most Cabinet members opposed this suggestion, together with the abundance of popular protests, showed how totally isolated Smetona was. In a broader sense, it indicated the failure of his entire regime. One of Smetona's two main supports had collapsed. In the days of the revolution the army supported the people.

On the evening of June 15, Smetona relegated his powers to Prime Minister Merkys under the pretext of poor health. He collected his valuables and a suitcase of money and fled Kaunas. On the night of June 15, the former dictator waded a stream, illegally crossing into Germany...

The reader may ask how events in Lithuania might have developed had Soviet forces not been present there. How would this have affected the possibilities for a socialist revolution?

Considering the course of events in and outside the country, which we have tried to analyse on the basis of authentic documents, eye-witness accounts and other facts, these questions can be answered in the following way.

There was a revolution-prone situation in Lithuania. The economic situation was extremely difficult. Lithuania's dependence on Germany, including economic dependence, was almost absolute. The working people had to endure incredible hardships, as was acknowledged even by the State Security Department of

the fascist government. Lithuania stood on the brink of economic ruin.

The political situation in the country was no better. Smetona's fascist regime had never enjoyed broad social or even party support. It had never won the people's sympathies. Frequent Cabinet reshuffles, especially in the final years of the regime, proved its instability. Towards the end the Tautininkai rulers even had to share power with other parties. This not only weakened the regime but discredited the policies of the Christian Democrats and the Liaudininkai party. The people now regarded them as fascist henchmen, not as a force capable of restoring democracy. The experience of other countries indicates just as conclusively that no party has ever gained popularity by collaborating with fascists, no matter in what form or for what purposes.

Furthermore, a series of coup attempts in Lithuania created the risk that new and even more reactionary forces might come to power. In such conditions, the people could not have any confidence in bourgeois forces and parties present on Lithuania's political scene.

On the other hand, it became obvious both to the Lithuanians and to observers abroad that the Smetona regime was incapable of preserving the country's integrity, sovereignty and independence.

The ominous threat of Hitler's occupation and the full loss of independence hung over the country all the time. No one in Lithuania had any doubts about the Nazis' true intentions. As for the rulers, they hoped that by granting Hitler one concession after another they would retain their well-being under his thumb. For the people this kind of future would have entailed the horrors not of their own fascism, but of the most bloodthirsty fascist regime—Hitlerism.

The Soviet Union, on the other hand, had always conducted policy based on honesty, demonstrating through practical actions, not empty words, that it wanted Lithuania to retain its independence and eliminate the threat of Hitler's occupation.

For this reason, the Lithuanian people as a whole knew with whom they should promote good-neighbourly relations. Lithuania could enjoy this kind of partnership only with the Soviet Union, especially at a time when war was raging in Europe.

So, in seeking to ingratiate itself with Nazi Germany and its armed forces, the Smetona regime could not but have lost

domestic support. Its foreign policy was just as unpopular. When under the people's pressure Smetona concluded treaties with the Soviet Union and on his own initiative violated them and drew closer to Germany, the Lithuanians became all the more determined to overthrow his regime. Most of them viewed a strong friendship with the USSR as the alternative.

It was not so much a question of Lithuanians favouring socialism as an economic system. It was rather that their attitude to the USSR was in effect their attitude to Lithuania's independence. Those who stood for Lithuania as a sovereign state stood for an alliance with the Soviet Union. And those who regarded the great socialist power as their main enemy were bound to move closer to Nazi Germany, though the latter was preparing to destroy the Lithuanian state and the Lithuanian nation as such. But a whole nation could not betray itself. It could not commit suicide.

There was one party in Lithuania capable of leading a revolution. This was the Communist Party. It was not large (by the time it emerged from the underground it had under 2,000 members), but it was the only political force that had at no time collaborated with fascism; it had always, even at the price of great sacrifices, fought against it.

All democrats who hated the Smetona regime for its ideology, methods of government and foreign policy rallied around the Communist Party.

All told, a socialist revolution in Lithuania was inevitable.

The presence of Red Army units undoubtedly made the Lithuanian democrats more confident that the Smetona regime would not dare to resort to extreme measures in order to suppress the revolution, such as inviting Germany to occupy the country. While the Red Army units did not interfere in any way in the internal affairs of the sovereign state, they played a deterrent role with regard to external aggression. Let us recall that there had been no Red Army units in Lithuania at all prior to October 1939, and yet the Smetona regime was falling apart so quickly that this was obvious both to the Lithuanians themselves and to foreign observers. In any case, the Red Army never interfered in Lithuania's internal affairs, as has been shown by the documents cited here and others as well.

So, if we are to try to answer the question of whether there would have been a socialist revolution in Lithuania had the Red

The Communist Party of Lithuania was the sole political force to decisively oppose fascism. Posters of the Lithuanian Communists urge their fellow countrymen to fight against fascism and for a Soviet Lithuania.



Army not been present in the country, the answer would be in the affirmative. And the revolution would have stood a good winning chance, had Germany not intervened. As it was, however, this chance was next to none.

Government and Independence: the People Decide

On June 15, 1940, Antanas Smetona issued a presidential act:
"To Mr. Antanas Merkys, Lieutenant-Colonel retired and Prime Minister.

"Due to my illness, in accordance with the Lithuanian Constitution (Article 71), I request that you act in my stead as President of the Republic."⁸³

On June 16, the Lithuanian government made the following statement:

"Yesterday, June 15 the President of the Republic, Antanas Smetona, left the country. The government regards his departure in the present circumstances as resignation from the office of President of the Republic. In conformity with Article 72 of the Lithuanian Constitution, the Prime Minister, Antanas Merkys, is acting as President of the Republic."⁸⁴

That same day, Merkys addressed the citizens of Lithuania on the radio. He said, in part:

"Dear Lithuanians and all residents of the Lithuanian Republic,

"The unusually rapid development of international events in the past few days has affected our country as well...

"Considering the most important vital interests of our people, namely, those conditions essential to our peaceful and creative work, we must analyse the situation that has arisen. We are confident that the arrival in Lithuania of new army units from the Soviet Union has taken place for the purpose of ensuring greater security for Lithuania and the Soviet Union. Thus, this army has come to us as a friendly allied army. It is generally regarded as such and has been welcomed by our army accordingly. All the people of the country should perceive and evaluate this precisely this way. From the standpoint of the mutual assistance treaty, the increase of the armed contingent in Lithuania at this time is quite

understandable. Our internal social, cultural, economic and political affairs should not be affected by this...

"I would like to conclude by saying that I have no doubts whatever that the leadership of our country will be able to make our vital interests accord with the conditions dictated by current international events..."⁸⁵

On June 15 and 16, the arriving Red Army units were joyfully greeted by thousands of people in Kaunas, Vilnius, Panevėžys and other towns. At a prison in Kaunas there was a demonstration demanding the release of anti-fascist inmates. In Panevėžys, demonstrators stormed and seized the police building and, despite police fire, freed the political prisoners.

Throughout the country, working people were calling for the establishment of a popular government. The police tried to suppress demonstrations and arrest Communists and other labour activists, but they no longer could. The people led by the Communist Party were in full control.

There was an abortive attempt to withdraw some of the army units to German-occupied territory. An order to this effect had been made by the former Minister of Defence, General Musteikis, who had fled to Germany. The Ninth Infantry Regiment, stationed in the border town of Marijampole, defied the reactionary commanding officers. The ranks obeyed General Vitkauskas' order and returned to base.

The Central Committee of Lithuania's Communist Party called on the working people to be on the look-out for any provocations by reactionaries, to keep calm, and to guard their enterprises. This was a course aimed at deposing the bourgeois government peacefully. The situation lent itself to this. The Merkys Cabinet was paralysed, the government apparatus was in a mess, and the situation was out of its control. When the army took the people's side, everything was as good as decided.

On June 17 the final meeting of anti-fascist leaders, called by the Secretariat of the Communist Party Central Committee, was held. It was decided at the meeting to support Justas Paleckis, a noted public figure and anti-fascist, as the new Prime Minister.* Antanas Merkys, acting President, agreed. Justas Paleckis was

* Justas Paleckis (1899-1980) was a writer and journalist. In 1937 he became a member of the Committee of the Anti-Fascist Popular Front. At the time described here he was not a member of the Communist Party.

appointed Prime Minister and asked to form a new government.

The new Cabinet, made up of prominent anti-fascists, was formed that same day, June 17. The previous government resigned together with Merkys. Justas Paleckis became acting President.

On June 18 he made a statement on the radio concerning the future policy:

"Dear citizens of the Lithuanian Republic,

"Yesterday a new government of Lithuania was formed. It rose up on the ruins of a personal dictatorship which had been born of violence and backed by arbitrary rule, a dictatorship that ravaged our people for 14 years.

"The regime of plutocracy was rotten at the core. The former rulers of our state went bankrupt in domestic and foreign policy alike. The tragic end of the regime was crowned by the shameful flight of the ex-President and his henchmen from their own people.

"The collapse of the regime has opened up unlimited possibilities for new, yet untested forces called upon to restore the people to creative work for peaceful life, material well-being and cultural progress...

"The immediate tasks will include a restructuring of the political system, which has thus far been directed against the interests of the people. To this end, the government will dissolve the present Sejm and abolish electoral restrictions regarding both state bodies and bodies of self-government, which were deceitfully imposed by K. Skučas.*

"One of the new government's first steps has been to honour the demand, so long coveted by all, that the incarcerated fighters for people's freedom and rights be freed and that privileged unions and parties be closed down.

"Serious attention will be paid to enforcing the principle of equality between nationalities and to stamping out chauvinism among different ethnic groups...

"The government fully approves of the consideration and care that large numbers of Lithuanian people have shown the Red Army of the friendly Soviet Union..."⁸⁶

The new government received written greetings from various

* Skučas was Minister of the Interior under Smetona.

public organisations, labour groups, and individuals. The following are excerpts from some of those messages:

"The workers of the Varpas printing house, together with all workers of Lithuania, are elated to have lived to see the day when the chains which stifled workers' rights and freedoms for decades were torn asunder, when Smetona's fascist regime, which sent the best sons of working Lithuania to rot in jails and concentration camps, collapsed..."⁸⁷

"The shop-floor and desk workers of a leather factory, along with all working people of Lithuania, greet Lithuania's new government and voice their absolute trust in it..."⁸⁸

(From a message of the workers of a leather factory in the town of Radviliškis)

"On behalf of the former Council of the Class Trade Unions of the Vilnius region, we extend our sincere wishes for successful work to the new government of Lithuania freed from the dictatorial yoke. We assure you of our cooperation."⁸⁹

On June 20, 1940, the chief commanders of the Lithuanian Army and the Saulys Union* were presented to Acting President Paleckis. General Vitkauskas spoke on behalf of those present:

"The supreme commanders and chiefs of the Army and the Saulys Union have come to you, Mr. President of the Republic, so as, on behalf of all army men and saulys, to extend sincere greetings to you, wish you success in your very responsible and important state work, and assure you that all soldiers and saulys will exercise all their duties in good faith and order and will devote all their energies to strengthening and enhancing the country's security."⁹⁰

The legitimacy of the new Lithuanian government (which stated that it would maintain friendly relations with all countries) was never questioned in the diplomatic world. On June 21, Professor Vincas Krėvė-Mičkevičius, the new Minister of Foreign Affairs, met with the heads of diplomatic missions in Kaunas. As representatives of belligerent countries were involved, the Foreign Minister met with them separately. The visitors included the plenipotentiary minister of Latvia, Seja; the plenipotentiary minister of France, Dulong; the plenipotentiary minister of the United

* Saulys Union (Riflemen's Union) was a nationalist paramilitary organisation, one of the supports of the Smetona regime.

States, Norem; the plenipotentiary minister of the Soviet Union, Pozdnyakov; the plenipotentiary minister of Estonia, Lattik; the plenipotentiary minister of Great Britain, Preston; the plenipotentiary minister of Germany, Zechlin; the papal nuncio, Centoz; as well as the heads of the diplomatic missions of Italy, Sweden and Denmark.⁹¹ None of the governments had recalled its representatives from Lithuania.

This fact and many others indicated that Lithuania's new government was regarded as constitutional. The introduction of new Soviet army units met with no objections from the West. Lord Halifax, British Foreign Secretary, said at a meeting of the British Cabinet that as far as he could judge, the concentration of Soviet troops in the Baltic states was a defensive undertaking.⁹²

On June 22, Professor Krėvė-Mičkevičius sent a telegram to Lithuanian embassies abroad:

"Lithuania's new government was formed on June 17 in a constitutional order. The mainstays of the state structure have not been changed. The right to property is inviolable. The envisaged reform of the political system will be carried out in accordance with the law. In the field of foreign policy, in relations with all states, the government will maintain the good relations which have been established to date. A special concern of the new government will be to cultivate good relations with the Soviet Union. The increase in the Soviet Army garrisons does not infringe on the country's independence or economic and other interests, as the aim of the Soviet garrisons is strictly to guarantee security interests. The mutual assistance pact signed in Moscow on October 10, 1939, remains the basis of relations between Lithuania and the Soviet Union. There have been no incidents in the country. Life is proceeding normally."⁹³

On June 24 a rally and a demonstration took place in Kaunas. Some 70,000 took to the streets bearing the slogan "Long Live Socialist Lithuania". The immediate item on the agenda was to hold free elections to new governing bodies that could decide the country's political structure.

On June 25 a meeting of the Council of Ministers, in keeping with Article 81 of Lithuania's Constitution, asked the President of the Republic to dissolve the Sejm which had been elected under the fascist regime.⁹⁴

On July 5 the new government promulgated a declaration about elections to the Sejm. It reviewed what it had done to



At meetings and demonstrations on June 24, 1940, nearly 70 thousand people of Kaunas expressed their support of the decisions of the Popular Sejm.

People demonstrating in favour of Soviet government and of the socialist path of development for Lithuania.



democratise life in the country and explained the need to amend the electoral law:

"The plutocratic Tautininkai government and its dictatorial regime only served the interests of the ruling clique and were afraid of popular representation. For this reason, they did not convene the Sejm for more than ten years and then adopted an electoral law deleting any mention of democracy and granting no real rights to the Sejm.

"The popular government considers it necessary to draft an electoral law so that the Sejm might become close to the people, so that it might become truly democratic and express the will of the working people of our country.

"Filled with determination and unshakeable desire to build its state work in close contact with the people, the government has resolved:

"1. To issue a new law on elections to the Popular Sejm.

The Popular Government of Lithuania was established on June 17, 1940. It comprised (from left to right): M. Mickis, Vincas Krėvė-Mičkevičius, A. Venclova, Justas Paleckis, P. Pakarkis, E. Talvanauskas, J. Koganas, and Vincas Vitkauskas.



- "2. To call elections to a new Popular Sejm.
- "3. To form a Central Electoral Commission.
- "4. Considering the urgent tasks of the state, to fix the date of elections to the Popular Sejm as July 14, 1940."⁹⁵

On July 8, 1940, a Law on Elections to the Popular Sejm was signed. It gave the vote to the overwhelming majority of the country's adults (practically all citizens who could act for themselves and were aged 21 or over), including all those who had been disfranchised under the Smetona regime. The balance of power was so obviously in favour of the working people that there was no need to introduce any restrictions on representatives of the exploiter classes or on supporters and collaborators of the former fascist government.⁹⁶

The election campaign got under way throughout the country. In some places reactionaries tried to use it to serve their own purposes although no organised demonstrations took place, nor

The year 1940. The land commission of the Kruonsky village Soviet of the Kaunas district distributes proprietors' land, as was done throughout Lithuania. Peasants experience true equality for the first time.



could they have. Revolutionary events were developing so rapidly that the supporters of the former regime became confused and disorganised.

In early July, a Union of the Working People of Lithuania was established. This was an electoral alliance of the working people led by the Communist Party. Even before the Union was founded, working Lithuanians called for a drastic restructuring of life in the country. The following are excerpts from a resolution of a rally held at Marijampole on June 29:

- "1. To expropriate the land, animals and implements from the landlords and give it all to landless or small-holding peasants.
- "2. To immediately confiscate the property of the enemies of the people who have fled the country....
- "5. To abolish syndicates as exploiters of the working people....
- "8. To provide jobs to the unemployed.
- "9. To introduce an eight-hour working day without delay..."⁹⁷

Working people in the town of Telšiai had come up with even more resolute socialist demands:

"We, workers and peasants of the town of Telšiai and its environs, numbering some 10,000, have gathered near the high school on June 30, 1940, to express our joy at being liberated from the violence engendered by Smetona and his underlings and maintained for 14 years...

"We, workers and peasants of the town of Telšiai and its environs, unconditionally support the Popular Government and all its measures directed against the enemies of the people...

"We urge our government:

- "1. To take all measures to establish Socialist Soviet Lithuania as soon as possible, as the ultimate goal of our struggle....
- "5. To give the proprietors' land to those who work it.

"6. To place all major factories, enterprises and banks under state control.

"7. To give jobs to all those who are willing and able to work..."⁹⁸

The foreign-policy ideas of the electoral programme of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania were outlined in the preamble (the demands in the field of domestic policy elaborated on the points made in the resolutions of various rallies and meetings of working Lithuanians such as those cited earlier; they called for democratising life in the country, abolishing all forms of

exploitation, and placing national government and economic management under the people's control):

"Throughout the history of the Lithuanian state, the Soviet Union has provided it with extensive, disinterested assistance. It was the only country to raise a voice of protest against the predatory seizure of Lithuania's ancient capital, Vilnius, and, in fact, it returned Vilnius to the Lithuanian people. On several occasions the great Soviet Union has saved our people from war and ruin. On October 10, 1939, the Soviet Union and the Lithuanian Republic signed a fraternal Treaty of Mutual Assistance, but Lithuania's former rulers, traitors to the people—Smetona, Skučas and company—wanted to annul the treaty, and thereby jeopardised Lithuania's security and independence."⁹⁹

In the field of foreign policy, the electoral platform of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania proposed:

"Friendship between the peoples of the Lithuanian Republic

The Popular Government honoured the demand of the working people that jobs be given to all those who are willing and able to work. In the photo: The unemployed receive job assignments at the labour exchange in Kaunas.



and the Soviet Union, and a firm alliance between the Lithuanian Republic and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."¹⁰⁰

This programme was signed by representatives of a general meeting of the workers of the Silva, Diana and Viarpalit factories; participants in a general meeting of scientists, cultural figures and artists (98 signatures); peasants of the village of Kunigiškai; the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League of Lithuania; representatives of the brewery workers of the joint-stock company Wolf-Egnelmann; representatives of the Central Bureau of Lithuania's Trade Unions; the Tenants' Union; the Board of the Free Thinkers' Union; the Board of the Union of Popular Aid of Lithuania; and representatives of many more factories and villages.

Resolutions supporting the electoral platform of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania were passed in the days that followed by insurance company workers, the workers of an electric power station in Vilnius, musicians, the Jewish Workers' Choir of Vilnius, the workers of the Kurland Creamery...¹⁰¹ A complete enumeration of all those who supported the electoral platform of the organisation, which was led by the Communist Party of Lithuania, would require many pages. Therefore, let us move on to the results of the voting: they will speak for themselves. The following is an excerpt from a report of the Central Electoral Commission on the results of the elections to the Popular Sejm:

"The Central Electoral Commission, in conformity with Article 44 of the Law on Elections to the Popular Sejm (*Government Newsletter*, No. 715, 5634), has analysed the ballot papers from the electoral commissions of all constituencies and has established the following:

"1. In the elections to the Popular Sejm, which took place on July 14-15, 1940, under Articles 32-35 of the Law on Elections to the Popular Sejm, 1,386,569 voters took part, that is, 95.51 per cent of all those who had the right to vote under Article 1 of said Law.*

"2. Candidates of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania received 1,375,349 votes, or 99.19 per cent of all those cast.

"3. There were no complaints about unfair or incorrect polling.

* The turn-out at the 1936 elections, which were held in patently undemocratic conditions when far fewer citizens enjoyed the right to vote, was only 68 per cent.

"4. As the elections took place in conformity with the law, the Central Electoral Commission, in accordance with Article 44 of the Law on Elections to the Popular Sejm, has decided to publish the following list of candidates elected to the Popular Sejm in the *Government Newsletter* (the list of those elected follows)."¹⁰²

The unprecedented turn-out and almost complete unanimity in appraising the platform of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania made the elections of July 14-15, 1940, a kind of referendum at which the citizens of Lithuania called almost unanimously for a socialist transformation of the country and for a close alliance with the Soviet Union.

The Popular Sejm Makes Its Decision

After the elections, in the days leading up to the first sittings of the Sejm, a wave of rallies and demonstrations swept across the country. They called for establishing a Soviet state system, requesting the admission of Lithuania to the USSR, and nationalising the land and major industrial and trade enterprises.

On July 21, 1940, the Popular Sejm met for its first session in the State Theatre building in Kaunas. Justas Paleckis, the Acting President of Lithuania, opened the session with the following message:

"On behalf of the first Popular Government of Lithuania, I greet you, deputies of the first Popular Sejm, true representatives of the working people of free Lithuania. At the place where 20 years ago representatives of sundry groups of bourgeois Lithuanians gathered to lay the so-called "foundations" of democratic Lithuania which were so soon to collapse, you have come to lay the foundations of a new Lithuania, a Lithuania of the working people..."

"The historic struggle between the Lithuania of the lords and the Lithuania of the working people has ended with the victory of the progressive working-class Lithuania; the dreams of Lithuania's best sons have come true. Now the Popular Government is entrusting Lithuania's future to the Popular Sejm and is waiting for its decisions on the great problems facing our country."¹⁰³

The Sejm approved all Popular Government actions and empowered it to continue its work until a new government was formed.

After thoroughly discussing the events in the country in recent decades, the Sejm unanimously adopted a Declaration on Lithuania's State Structure. The Declaration said, in part:

"...For many years the Lithuanian people languished under the yoke of this reactionary regime*. Smetona's clique denied our hard-working and talented people all rights, subjected them to arbitrary rule..."

"Smetona's policy on nationalities was a policy of permanent incitement of ethnic strife and of political instigation of one nationality against another...

"The Lithuanian people's interests demanded a permanent and close unity and friendship with the Soviet Union. As for Smetona and his underlings, they conducted a policy hostile to

* Smetona's fascist regime.

The State Theatre in Kaunas was the venue of the first session of Lithuania's Popular Sejm on July 21, 1940.



the USSR. They placed our country in a position of semi-colonial dependence on individual capitalist predators, thereby bringing tremendous harm to the Lithuanian people and preparing Lithuania as a springboard for potential attacks against the USSR.

The Lithuanian people could no longer tolerate the ruling clique's internal arbitrary rule and foreign policy treachery. In one united upsurge, they overthrew the hated government and the entire ruling elite and paved the way for free elections to a truly Popular Sejm...

"July 14 and 15, 1940, were great historic days in the life of Lithuania's working masses..."

"On those days the Lithuanian people expressed their will: to abolish forever the political domination of landlords and capitalists, establish truly democratic government, and start restructuring the state system with their own hands..."

"The Popular Sejm as a sovereign representative of the Lithuanian people's will, called upon to consolidate their victory over the plutocratic regime, regards as its main task and duty a reconsideration of the question of state power in Lithuania..."

"In expressing the unanimous will of the free and hard-working people of Lithuania, the Popular Sejm declares the establishment of Soviet government on all of Lithuania's territory.

"Lithuania is being proclaimed a Soviet Socialist Republic. From now on, all power in the Lithuanian SSR belongs to the working people of the towns and the countryside as represented by the Soviets of Working People's Deputies..."¹⁰⁴

After proclaiming Lithuania a Soviet Socialist Republic, the Sejm took up the question of the new republic's relations with the USSR. The deputies fully realised that, given the conditions in Europe at the time, the mere proclamation of Soviet government in Lithuania could not guarantee its independence and peaceful development. Nazism was becoming an ever more real and ominous threat. Therefore, it was moved that Lithuania request admission to the USSR. The proposal was made by deputy Sniečkus. He said:

"All working people of Lithuania are asking to be admitted into the family of the peoples of the great Soviet Union."

"That is why we, deputies from the constituencies of Kaunas, Vilnius and Šiauliai, have consulted with each other and have decided to propose that the issue of admission to the USSR be placed on the agenda,

"The introduction of Soviet government in Lithuania cannot completely guarantee that socialist Lithuania will be spared from imperialist designs on its existence.

"The Lithuanian people, who have borne the yoke of foreign rule and the hardships of war and occupation, know that this guarantee of their existence can be provided only through admission to the fraternal family of the peoples of the Soviet Union..."¹⁰⁵

The Popular Sejm approved a Declaration on Lithuania's Accession to the USSR, which stated:

"Guided by the will of the people who have overthrown the old regime, a regime of oppression and the absence of rights, a regime of exploitation of man by man, the Popular Sejm resolves:

"That the Supreme Soviet of the USSR be requested to admit the Lithuanian Republic to the Soviet Union as a Union Republic on the same grounds that govern the entry into the USSR of the Ukrainian, Byelorussian and other Union Republics."¹⁰⁶

The Declaration approved, a plenipotentiary delegation was elected to go to Moscow and request the USSR Supreme Soviet to admit Lithuania to the Soviet Union.

The Sejm passed a number of important laws making the land state property and nationalising banks and large industry, and elected a Constitutional Commission to draft a new Constitution.

On August 3-6, 1940, the Seventh Special Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet convened in Moscow to discuss the admission of the Soviet Baltic republics to the Soviet Union.*

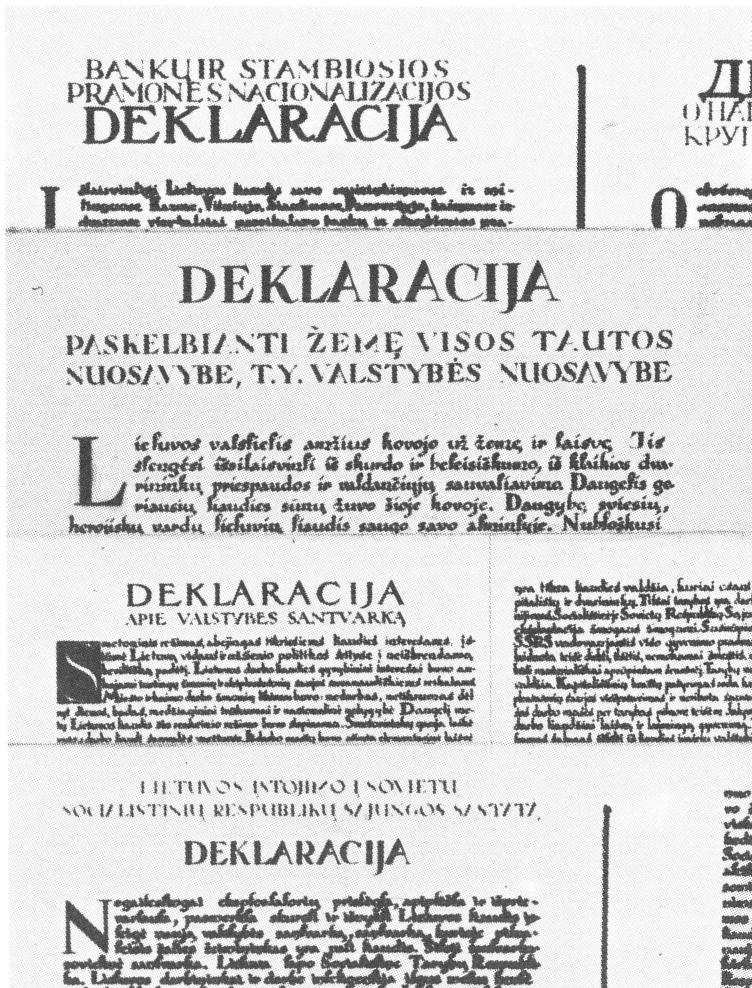
Justas Paleckis, who led the delegation of Lithuania's Popular Sejm, told the USSR Supreme Soviet:

"The Lithuanian people's attitude towards the Smetona rulers' hostile, undemocratic policy was vividly demonstrated by the results of the elections to the Lithuanian Popular Sejm on July 14 and 15 this year. Never before had there been such popular unity as during these elections. Despite the intrigues and slander of the enemies of the people, 95.51 per cent of all eligible voters went to the polls, of whom 99.19 per cent voted for the candidates of the Union of the Working People of Lithuania ...

"The previous Sejm had not a single worker, peasant or soldier, not a single scientist or artist, not a single representative of the ethnic minorities, and not a single woman. It was made up

* After socialist revolutions triumphed in Latvia and Estonia, the two republics made similar requests to the USSR Supreme Soviet.

On July 22, 1940, the Popular Sejm adopted the Declaration on the State Structure; the Declaration on the Nationalisation of Banks and Major Factories; the Declaration on the Nationalisation of Land; and the Declaration on Lithuania's Accession to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.



only of large and small landowners, functionaries and priests. In the 79-member Popular Sejm we can see 21 workers, 25 peasants, 27 scientists, artists and intellectuals, one artisan, one farmhand, three soldiers of the Lithuanian People's Army, and eight women.¹⁰⁷

Several other members of the delegation spoke after Justas Paleckis, and then a deputy of the USSR Supreme Soviet, P. Ponomarenko, from Byelorussia, moved that the Supreme Soviet approve a bill to meet the request of the Lithuanian SSR. He also suggested that part of the Byelorussian SSR with a predominant Lithuanian population be turned over to the Lithuanian SSR. Once again, Lithuania was receiving its lands from the Soviet Union, lands it had lost through historical injustice. The law stated:

August, 1940. The plenipotentiary delegation of the Popular Sejm went to Moscow to request the USSR Supreme Soviet to admit Lithuania to the Soviet Union. The delegation carried out the wish of the people that Lithuania throw in its lot with that of the fraternal republics of the Soviet Union. In the photo: The delegation is escorted to the Kaunas railway station.



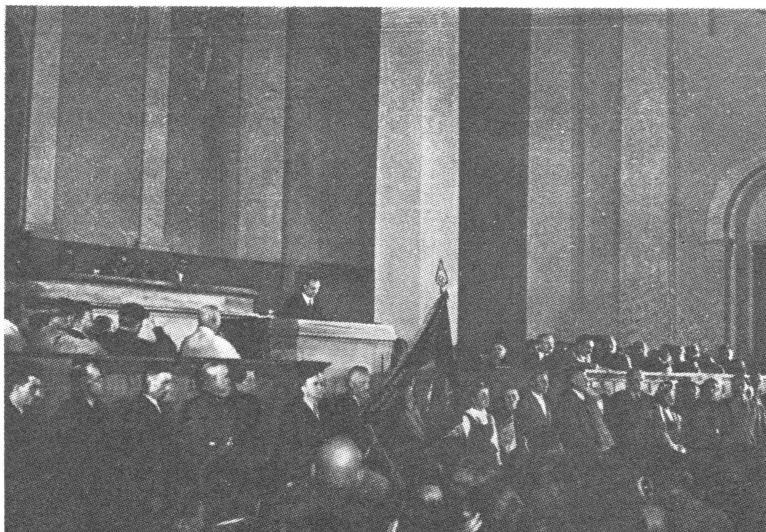
"The proposal of the Supreme Soviet of the Byelorussian SSR to transfer to the Union Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic the Švenčionis region and those parts of the territory of the Vidzy, Godutishkovo, Ostrovets, Voronovo and Radun regions of the Byelorussian SSR with a predominant Lithuanian population is hereby accepted."¹⁰⁸

After the Soviet Union defeated Nazi Germany (which invaded it on June 22, 1941), Lithuania restored its sovereignty over the Klaipeda region, which became part of the Lithuanian SSR.

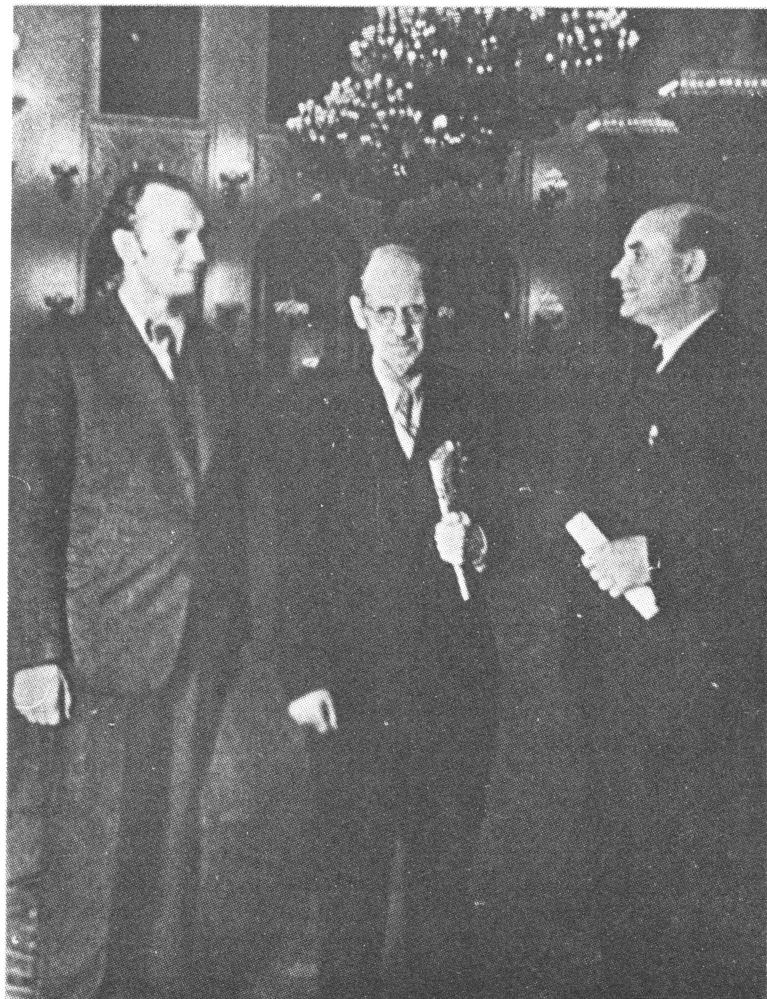
The Lithuanian people became a full-fledged member of the fraternal family of the peoples of the USSR.

A short time later elections to the USSR Supreme Soviet were held in Lithuania (35 deputies were elected). The Popular Sejm was transformed into an interim Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR. Justas Paleckis was elected Chairman of its Presidium and

On August 3, 1940, the Seventh Special Session of the USSR Supreme Soviet convened in Moscow to discuss Lithuania's admission to the USSR. In the photo: The head of the delegation of the Popular Sejm, Justas Paleckis, speaks.



In the lobbies of the Supreme Soviet's Seventh Special Session, Lithuanian President Justas Paleckis, Latvian President August Kirchensteins, and Estonian President Johannes Vares discuss prospects for the development of their republics and of the Soviet Baltic as a whole.



became Deputy Chairman of the Presidium of the USSR Supreme Soviet. M. Gedvilas was appointed head of Lithuania's Soviet government. The Supreme Soviet of Lithuania moved the republic's capital from Kaunas to Vilnius, the historical capital of the Lithuanian state.

On August 25, 1940, a special session of Lithuania's Popular Sejm adopted a Constitution of the Lithuanian SSR. The Constitution proclaimed extensive rights for the citizens of the republic. It stated that Lithuania was voluntarily uniting with the equal Soviet republics for the purpose of establishing mutual assistance in all fields. To this end, under Article 14 of the then Constitution of the USSR, Soviet Lithuania (like the other Union republics) transferred some of its rights to the USSR.

The Constitution of the Lithuanian SSR declared that "outside the limits of Article 14 of the USSR Constitution, the Lithuanian SSR shall administer state power independently, preserving its sovereign rights in full."¹⁰⁹

Afterword

And so we conclude our story on how the socialist revolution triumphed in Lithuania, how Soviet government was re-established there, and how the Lithuanian people resolved the problem of restoring their independence and territorial integrity. The reader, however, may ask: Is there not a stark contradiction in this essay? Is it possible to talk of Lithuania's independence when it is part of the USSR?

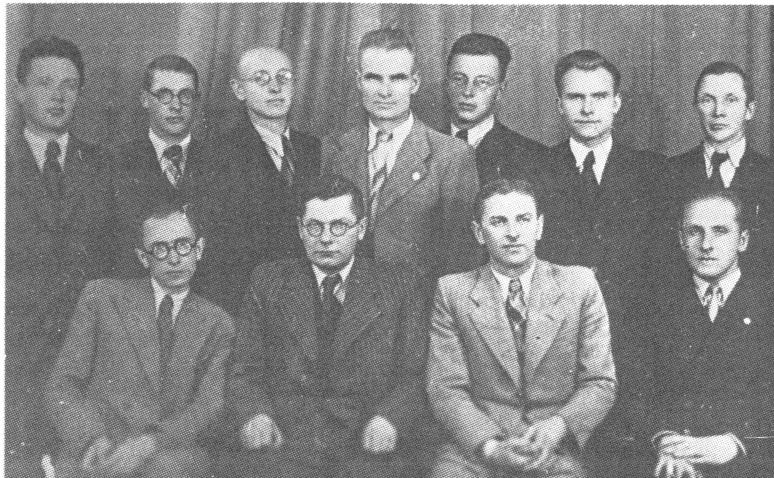
There is no contradiction whatever between Lithuania's voluntary accession to the USSR and its independence. The Lithuanian people were united with the other Soviet peoples historically, economically and politically, and legally this unity was fixed by the voluntary decision of the Popular Sejm, which had been elected by the overwhelming majority of Lithuania's population. Furthermore, historically speaking, countries uniting several nationalities are sooner the rule than the exception. Most countries in Europe, for example, are multinational.

Still, what is it that allows us to speak so confidently of Lithuania's independence (its territorial integrity is an indisputable fact, as it was within the USSR that Lithuania restored sovereignty over all its territory)? First and foremost, it is the principles on which the USSR was formed and on which it now exists. They are fixed in the USSR Constitution:

"Article 70. The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is an integral, federal, multinational state formed on the principle of socialist federalism as a result of the free self-determination of nations and the voluntary association of equal Soviet Socialist Republics..."

"Article 72. Each Union Republic shall retain the right freely to secede from the USSR."

"Article 76. A Union Republic is a sovereign Soviet socialist



A committee headed by the Minister of Justice, Pakarklis (centre), was formed in order to draft the Constitution of the Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic.

On August 25, 1940, the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Lithuanian SSR was elected. It comprised representatives of the various sections of the population.



state that has united with other Soviet Republics in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

"Outside the spheres listed in Article 73 of the Constitution of the USSR*, a Union Republic exercises independent authority on its territory..."

"Article 78. The territory of a Union Republic may not be altered without its consent. The boundaries between Union Republics may be altered by mutual agreement of the Republics concerned, subject to ratification by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics."

"Article 80. A Union Republic has the right to enter into relations with other states, conclude treaties with them, exchange diplomatic and consular representatives, and take part in the work of international organisations."

"Article 81. The sovereign rights of Union Republics shall be safeguarded by the USSR."¹¹⁰

Those who are acquainted with life in the USSR will not likely need any special proof to be certain that the independence of the Union Republics is independence in the strictest sense of the word. Lithuania's economic, social and cultural successes and its progress in the development of the Lithuanian language and literature also provide convincing proof of this. But this subject is large enough to make another book.

* Article 73 of the Constitution stipulates that a number of major issues of this federal state lie within the jurisdiction of the USSR as a whole (including the admission of new republics, deciding the state border of the USSR, problems of war and peace, the organisation of defence, etc.).

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